South Haven Tribune

$3

February 1, 2026

A TRUE WINTER

Photo provided / Tom Renner

A South Haven police officer ventures out Saturday to escort visitors off the ice shelf that formed over Lake Michigan's shoreline in South Haven.

SWMI pummeled by snow, sub-zero temperatures

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor
and LAUREN RICE
and LOUISE WREGE
HP Staff Writers

Polar air that spread across Southwest Michigan over the past weekend brought subzero temperatures into the start of this week.

With the deep freeze came school closures, a dash to clear roads and a unique water main break.

Dustin Norman, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service at the Northern Indiana office, said spotter reports cited as much as 13 inches that had fallen over the weekend in Berrien County.

According to climate data collected from Niles, Mich., he said the total number will climb by the end of Tuesday.

"Because lake effect snow is so localized, it differs across Berrien County," Norman said. "One thing Berrien County and the lower part of Michigan has an advantage is being on the lakeshore, which moderates the temperatures a bit."

The lowest recorded temperature over the weekend – based on the National Weather Service data that focuses on ambient air without wind chill – was minus-2 degrees Fahrenheit on Saturday morning in Benton Harbor.

With the wind chill included, Norman said it was minus-14 degrees at 11 a.m. on Saturday in Benton Harbor.

Wind speeds weren't strong over the weekend, but that quickly changed Monday. NWS reported wind speeds up to 29 mph winds Monday afternoon, which was enough to cause blowing snow issues for motorists.

Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Charlie Johan clears snow from a home along Park Street in St. Joseph on Monday after a winter storm dumped several inches of snow across Southwest Michigan.

Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

A worker clears snow along West Main Street in Benton Harbor on Monday.

Norman said the cold snap hitting Southwest Michigan can be traced back to the relatively warmer temperatures in the arctic. Those warmer air temperatures have allowed for the colder air to spill down through Canada into the central and eastern part of the United States.

"There's nothing indicating in the near term that it's going to go away. This colder air will stick around for the next seven to 10 days," Norman said. "It's a good time for people to check on their neighbors and the elderly with this consistent cold pattern. Watch out for each other."

Avoid the ice shelf

South Haven is experiencing a true Michigan winter this year with white out conditions and freezing temperatures.

The cold and the snow are accompanied by ice that covers the beach and lake to create a beautiful and fascinating sight. Looks, however, can be deceiving and the beauty of the lake can distract from the dangers that exist under the snow.

"Inland lakes or inland ponds they'll get three, four, five inches of ice on them and they're safe to walk on after you hit five, six inches of ice because it's solid," South Haven Fire Chief Brandon Hinz said. "The waves that form in Lake Michigan, a lot of that stuff will get blown in and then with the waves constantly hitting all those shelves, they'll undermine a lot of that ice. They create big void areas, hollow areas and you have no idea what's underneath your feet and that's what makes it so dangerous."

The pier at South Haven's South Beach can be dangerous in the winter for this very reason.

"We've had instances where folks have been walking out on the piers before, slipped and fell and we've had to go get them for joint related injuries and stuff and that's tough," Hinz said. "It's tough trying to carry somebody over all that terrain, slipperiness and unevenness."

Hinz said South Haven Area Emergency Services has special training, suits and equipment for cold water rescues.

"We have cold water rescue suits that we wear to go out to try to rescue somebody, but if these shelves keep extending further and further out, which they usually do, we're limited on how far we can go out with that

See **WINTER**, page A2

New endowments to benefit civic groups in South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Area Community Foundation recently created endowments that will be given to four civic organizations who have contributed to the quality of life in the South Haven community.

According to a news release, the endowments, announced by Executive Director Jim Marcoux, will benefit SHOUT for South Haven, the South Haven Performance Series, the South Haven Speakers Series and the South Haven Theatre Series.

The idea to create the endowments originated with Robert Copping, founder of SHOUT for South Haven and the inspiration behind creating the three series.

"Generous donors have supported the operational needs of these organizations over the years and that will need to continue," Copping said in the release. "My hope is that income from these new endowments will allow each series to continue to enhance their offerings to the community while maintaining affordable admission fees."

Copping was recently the recipient of the 2025 Governor George Romney Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his community advocacy.

See **ENDOWMENTS**, page A2

Where the Michigan Senate candidates stand on ICE tactics

By MELISSA NANN BURKE
The Detroit News (TNS)

DETROIT — The Democratic candidates for Michigan's open U.S. Senate seat are united in condemning what they deem abuses of power by federal immigration agents, but they are split on how to rein them in after another person was fatally shot Saturday in Minneapolis.

One candidate, Abdul El-Sayed of Ann Arbor, wants to entirely abolish the entity of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, likening it to a paramilitary force operating beyond the law that can't be reformed.

"It's like having black mold in your house. Once it's there – it's not saying you don't want a house. It's just saying you don't want that house," El-Sayed said. "And this has gotten so far away from any sort of rational approach to immigration enforcement that I think it needs to be done away with."

State Sen. Mallory McMorrow of Royal Oak said ICE has "gone rogue" and needs an overhaul, while the focus of U.S. Rep. Haley Stevens of Birmingham has been calling for accountability and forcing the agency's boss, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, from office via impeachment ☒ a long shot in the Republican-controlled Congress.

"Congress: Not one more penny until we get the same oversight and accountability we demand from every law enforcement agency," McMorrow wrote Saturday on social media after the 37-year-old man was killed.

Department of Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said in a Saturday statement that federal officers were conducting an operation as part of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown and fired "defensive shots" after a man with a handgun approached and "violently resisted" officers who tried to disarm him, the Associated Press reported.

The man's parents identified him as Alex Pretti, an intensive care unit nurse at the Veterans Administration.

Several bystander videos of the shooting emerged soon after. Pretti is seen with a phone in his hand, but none appears to show him with a visible weapon.

The officer who shot the man is an eight-year Border Patrol veteran, federal officials said.

The shooting occurred as Minneapolis has continued to see daily protests following the shooting of 37-year-old Renee Good when an ICE officer fired into her vehicle multiple times on Jan. 7.

Rogers weighs in

The presumptive Republican nominee, former U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers of White Lake Township, has defended the immigration enforcement crackdown under President Donald Trump and blasted his Democratic opponents in an ad last week for their opposition to the border wall and to boosting the number of immigration agents.

But Rogers, a former FBI agent, also said it's "absolute malpractice" for Democratic political leaders in Minnesota to paint federal agents in Minneapolis as thugs who are "disappearing" people, saying that encourages "bad behavior" toward federal law enforcement.

"Do you want murderers and rapists and child predators in jail, are actually out of the country, or you want

See **CANDIDATES**, page A6

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 127th Year

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A new chapter for A Little Free Library

Dear editor,

New Year's Eve left us with an unwelcome surprise. A Little Free Library we've joyously shared for a decade with South Haven and visitors was vandalized. The vandal's struggle to wrest the little wooden house from its post left it so damaged, I had to cut it down so it wouldn't collapse on a child reaching for a book. We live near the children's park in town.

Without interruption since 2015 – including winter, including a pandemic – we continued to circulate hundreds and hundreds of books. One six-year-old girl was so charmed when she visited one summer that, for Christmas, she asked her parents for a little library at their home in Lansing. The next summer, the same girl returned to our book box, depositing one of the books with us that someone had left in hers in Lansing. There are other precious stories.

I am an author. I love books. I am overjoyed when children read. I installed the little library as a gift to the community. In the spring, I will try to repair, then repaint and reinstall it. To those who have stopped, noticed the empty stump, and wondered what happened, know that, one way or another, the Little Free Library will return.

Michael McCarthy
South Haven

OBITUARY

Karl Andrews

July 31, 1936 – Jan.1, 2026

Karl Hubert Andrews, 89, passed away on Jan.1, 2026 in South Haven, Mich. surrounded by his family. He was born on July 31, 1936 in Jackson, Mich. to the late Howard and Inez (Bridge) Andrews.

Karl was a very proud alumni of the University of Michigan and marching band where he played the tuba.

He worked as an electrical engineer for Consumers Power for 31 years and retired from Palisades Nuclear Plant in 1991. Karl coached youth hockey for many years in Jackson. Upon retirement he pursued his love of music and model trains.

Karl was an active participant in the Casco Community Band, South Shore Concert Band and played in and directed the Strudel Meisters German polka band where he got to showcase his tuba playing talents. He also loved his time in the Model Train Club where he met many wonderful friends. After moving to South Haven, Karl became very active in the Casco United Methodist Church where he devoted a lot of time and love.

In 1956, in Jackson, Karl married his childhood sweetheart, Joyce Fauser. She survives along with their five children: Tony (Cassie) Andrews, Jeff (Brigitte) Andrews, Kurt (Midori) Andrews, Judy Potter (Jim) and Eric Andrews.

Grandchildren include Jena Bradley, Zachary Andrews, Kai Andrews, Angie Niemer, Ryan Potter and Ashley Foltz. Great-grandchildren include Blake, Lacey and Zoey Andrews, Owen and Evan Bradley, Isaac and Isla Niemer and Phaelynn, Felix and Fletcher Potter.

He is preceded by his siblings Marian Nimmo and Howard Andrews.

There will be a celebration of life service on Feb. 7 at Casco United Methodist Church, 880 66th St in South Haven, MI.

Visitation will take place at 11 a.m., service at noon with a luncheon to follow. The family is encouraging everyone to wear their Maize and Blue attire in honor of dad.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to Casco United Methodist Church or Wings of Hope Hospice 530 Linn St, Allegan, Mi 49010.

Those wishing to share a memory of Karl online may do so at www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements have been entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Former candidate Perry Johnson joins crowded Republican field running for governor of Michigan

By ISABELLA VOLMERT
Associated Press

JOHNSON

LANSING — A former GOP gubernatorial candidate who once tried to unseat Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is seeking the office again, joining a crowded field of Republicans running in the battleground state.

Oakland County businessman Perry Johnson announced his second bid for governor Monday. His entrance to the race comes as the Republican candidates compete for President Donald Trump's endorsement ahead of the Aug. 4 primary.

In a video advertisement released Monday, Johnson described Michigan's government as inefficient.

"We need to shake up the system," he said.

Johnson, a management consultant, was part of a slate of Republicans to run against Whitmer in 2022. His nearly $8 million bid ended when the state's election bureau ruled he did not submit enough valid signatures required for nominating petitions. He also made a long shot bid for president ahead of 2024.

In announcing his campaign, Johnson told the Detroit News he plans to spend $9 million of his own money in the next two months.

Whitmer is term-limited and cannot run again. Candidates from both parties and one campaigning as an independent have lined up to replace her.

On the Republican side, Johnson joins the field that includes U.S. Rep. John James, former Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox, state Senate Leader Aric Nesbitt and former Michigan House speaker Tom Leonard.

On the Democratic side, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson and Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson are competing for the nomination.

The longtime Democratic mayor of Detroit, Mike Duggan, is running for governor but as an independent.

ENDOWMENTS

From page A1

The Jane Goldwood Copping Endowment for the South Haven Performance Series specifically honors Copping's wife whose love of classical music was the inspiration for its founding.

"Founded in 2011 and with assets over $7.1 million, the South Haven Area Community Foundation is dedicated to enriching the quality of life in the greater South Haven area by securing its future through endowments," the release stated.

The Foundation in 2025 distributed over $142,000 to 25 local non-profit organizations.

"The South Haven Area Community Foundation is dedicated to enriching the quality of life in the greater South Haven area for its residents and visitors by securing its future through endowments," Marcoux said in the release. "For many decades Bob Copping has dedicated his life to making a difference – in his community, his state, his nation, and the world so creating these endowments is so fitting. They are another example of his vision for the future of our community."

The foundation can be reached by calling 269-815-4223 or by email to execdirector@southhavencf.org.

WINTER

From page A1

Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Snow drifts cover no parking signs along Lake Street in St. Joseph on Monday after a winter storm dumped several inches of snow across Southwest Michigan.

equipment on, so it's scary," Hinz said.

The risk of falling through the ice or slipping on the pier is not the only danger people can face this winter.

"We obviously suggest that nobody goes walking out on the pier or out on the ice on the lake in these kind of conditions," Hinz said. "One, it's dangerous and especially, I mean, it's just straight cold. One wouldn't think the difference between 10 and 30 degrees would be huge, but it is. If somebody did get stranded out there and nobody knew or was notified, I mean, you're talking frostbite in minutes in weather like this."

Salt isn't helping

St. Joseph Township Police Lt. Rick Knapp said a water main break a few days ago on Washington Avenue, just south of its intersection with St. Joseph Drive, flooded the road and is continuing to cause problems in the area.

"It did not all drain, so there's 2 inches of ice there, and it's an extremely slippery intersection," Knapp said. "... We've been busy all weekend with accidents and slide offs there."

Because of the extreme cold temperatures, he said salt isn't helping.

In addition, Knapp said the department has received several requests to do welfare checks on older people from out-of-town family members.

"It's not a bad idea to check on elderly people," he said. "Some people are too proud to say their furnace isn't working or something like that."

School's out

St. Joseph and Lakeshore school districts have taken five snow days already this year, with most of those falling in the last two weeks.

St. Joseph Superintendent Kristen Bawks said the districts get six snow days forgiven before either making them up later in the year or applying to the state superintendent for additional days.

"We go out and drive the roads as early as 4:30 in the morning to determine whether or not the conditions are safe for our students and staff," she said. "We look at snow accumulation, wind, any blowing or drifting, and temperatures, as well as the ability for the road crews to be able to clear not only the main roads, but secondary roads, neighborhoods, that sort of thing."

Lakeshore Superintendenr Greg Eding said safety is imperative when calling a snow day.

"I think the No. 1 factor any time you think about having school closed is student safety and their driving, their parents driving on the roads," he said. "And there are buses on the roads. Second to those things are staff safety, staff driving in."

Bawks said the district collaborates with neighboring school districts to know what they're seeing.

The decision, Eding said, has to be made by 5:45 a.m. at the latest, before the bus drivers come in to run their routes.

Bawks said they try to make the decision in advance, if possible, to give parents a heads-up.

"We do try to make the call the night before, if it's something that is (predictable) temperature-wise," she said. "We were able to do that last week. But when it's lake effect snow that's coming overnight, we drive early in the morning to be sure."

After-school events and games are a little different. If the weather clears, it's possible things will continue as planned.

"Typically, if we were to be traveling to another district, say Portage or Kalamazoo, that would be canceled because (of) the conditions on I-94," Bawks said. "But it's dependent on the particular storm and the conditions that day."

She said it's not uncommon in the winter to reschedule, but some games and events have had to be cancelled already this season.

Eding said Lakeshore canceled a girls basketball game against Buchanan that was scheduled for Monday evening.

"This has been a particularly poor stretch this last couple of weeks, so we hope to get some relief soon," Bawks said.

Continuous snowfall

"It's a true winter in Southwest Michigan and everywhere," said Adri Boone, administrative assistant at the Berrien County Road Department.

She said the day shift started plowing snow at 4 a.m. Monday.

"This band came through so fast in such a heavy quantity," she said. "People need to understand that it will take a little bit of time to get through the network."

She said they may not be plowing the roads shoulder to shoulder in some areas so they can get to more roads.

"We might not be able to do the full service because of the continuous snowfall, but we obviously want to make sure people have a reasonable ability to get in and out, even under these severe conditions," she said. "... The logic is at least you're getting touched – at least you're getting a certain level of service."

Boone said the effectiveness of the salt they put on the roads slows down in colder temperatures.

"One benefit to how the county operates is that we use a traction control material that is a mix of salt and sand so when it is too cold or the salt isn't being as active as it would be in warmer conditions, the sand portion of that traction control mix does provide some traction or the ability for your vehicle to grip to either slow down or turn or speed up at intersections and such," she said.

Boone said people are asked to not plow the snow into the street and not to pile the snow so high near the road that it obstructs the view of drivers.

In addition, she said in Michigan, it is illegal to park on the street when snow is present.

"Please make sure you're parking on private property. Otherwise, you could be immediately towed because, again another safety issue," Boone said.

She said vehicles parked on the streets prohibits the ability of the plows to properly remove the snow.

Indiana Michigan Power crews have strengthened the local electrical system ahead of winter weather by installing smart technology, upgrading equipment and proactively trimming trees.

Due to these efforts, I&M said they've cut customer outages by nearly 50 percent over the last five years.

"As our service area continues to experience below average temperatures and accumulating snowfall, Indiana Michigan Power continues to be at the ready in case outages occur," said Schnee Doyle, a communications specialist at I&M, on Monday. "This morning, I&M is not reporting significant outages due to the extreme winter weather."

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Lincoln Township police car hit on I-94

Semi-truck loses control while officer responds to crash

By LOUISE WREGE
Paxton Media Group

LINCOLN TOWNSHIP — Quick thinking by a Lincoln Township police officer minimized the damage to himself and his vehicle earlier this week when he was hit from behind by a semi-truck on I-94, according to Police Chief Gary Soper.

"The officer saw the semi out of control behind him, so he was actually able to put the squad car in drive and then accelerated to limit the impact, but the semi still impacted him," Soper said.

The officer was stopped on the left shoulder near Exit 23 on the westbound side of I-94, working another crash when his vehicle was hit at around 11 a.m. Monday.

"He saw (in his rear view mirror) the semi had a collision with another semi on the highway, bounced off that semi, and then collided with the squad car," he said.

Soper said the officer is fine because of his quick actions.

He said that was just one of several accidents Monday morning around Exit 23, which was caused by the severe winter storm.

"There were accidents on both sides of westbound and on the eastbound side," he said.

On Monday, Soper said the driving conditions were horrific.

"The roads are completely iced. Occasionally, visibility is down quite a bit," he said. "(Drivers) just have to slow down and watch ahead of them, giving them as much time as possible to react."

As of noon on Monday, Sopre said he had three squad cars handling multiple crash incidents on I-94.

"At those speeds, even if you're traveling 25 miles per hour under the speed limit, it's still a 3,500(-pound) car moving and it's difficult to stop on ice," Soper said.

Berrien County Sheriff Chuck Heit said there were crashes throughout the county due to the road conditions.

He said it's been a few years since this area has had temperatures this low for this long.

"We're encouraging people that if they have to drive, to slow down (and) take extra precautions," Heit said. "Give yourself extra time to stop. Just the normal things we deal with in Michigan."

ICE SHELF AHEAD

Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Ice and snow cover the South Haven Lighthouse and pier Saturday in South Haven. Officials remind visitors of the dangers of walking along the piers and ice shelf during the winter season.

State: New wrong-way detection system cut crashes on Michigan highway

By JANELLE D. JAMES
Bridge Michigan

While wrong-way crashes are increasing statewide in Michigan, one major highway is seeing the opposite trend. Since new wrong-way detection systems went up on U.S. 131 in Grand Rapids, crashes have dropped more than 50 percent, according to state transportation officials.

Beginning in 2023, nearly two dozen new "wrong-way" detection systems were installed along a stretch of U.S. 131 between M-11 (28th Street) and Ann Street in Grand Rapids. The overall project cost about $200,000, including a $92,000 federal grant.

The technology is mounted on existing "wrong way" and "do not enter" signs. When a driver enters the wrong ramp, the system activates flashing lights and cameras. The lights warn the driver right away and police are alerted.

"We picked this section because it has the highest volume of traffic, and it has the most bars and restaurants on that stretch … so people happen to be under the influence, which the vast majority of these crashes usually involve an impaired driver," said John Richard, communications representative for the Grand Region of the Michigan Department of Transportation.

Since the detection systems were installed, there has been a 61 percent reduction in the number of drivers going up the wrong ramp and a 54 percent reduction in crashes, according to MDOT.

"They've proven to be effective," Richard said. "We've got some that have video, and we see people getting on the ramp the wrong way, the lights flash and they turn around. So, it's very encouraging and it's very effective."

The detection systems can also be found outside of Grand Rapids, on I-194 in Battle Creek and several systems are expected to be installed in Metro Detroit on M-10, I-375, I-75 and I-696.

"Safety is paramount for MDOT and wrong-way detection devices are a tool our department can lean into (to) improve safety for all road users," said Michele Muller, MDOT's manager for connected, automated vehicles and electrification. "Installation will take time and funding, but combined with increased driver awareness, this technology can save lives."

Wrong-way crashes up statewide

While the systems have proven to be effective in Grand Rapids, wrong-way crashes have actually increased across the state over the last few years.

In 2022, there were 407 wrong-way crashes and 10 fatal crashes, according to Michigan State Police data. The following year, there were 420 crashes and 19 fatal crashes. Then 445 crashes and 13 fatal ones in 2024.

It's not just happening here in Michigan; nationally, fatalities due to wrong-way driving have been on the rise. In 2018, there were 445 fatal wrong-way crashes, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration. By 2022, that number jumped to 704 fatal accidents.

Experts say there is often a correlation between wrong-way driving and impairment.

"We found three common factors in wrong-way crashes: alcohol impairment, older age and driving without a passenger," said Adrienne Woodland, spokesperson for AAA – The Auto Club Group. "Of course, if you're driving, do not drink. If you are planning to drink, make sure that you plan for a ride home."

Despite wrong-way crashes increasing over the last few years in Michigan, alcohol involved incidents have decreased from 9,078 in 2020 to 8,542 in 2024. Drug-involved crashes have also decreased during that time, from 3,040 to 2,315.

Mark Totten drops bid for Michigan attorney general after UAW endorses his opponent

By BETH LEBLANC
The Detroit News (TNS)

LANSING — Former U.S. Attorney Mark Totten has dropped his bid for the Democratic nomination for state attorney general.

Totten's departure from the race comes a day after the United Auto Workers union endorsed his primary opponent, Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald.

Following that and other major union endorsements, Totten said he concluded there was no "viable path forward." He did not endorse a Democratic candidate in his statement Tuesday.

"While I regret that I will not have the opportunity to serve as attorney general, I remain committed to this work and look forward to supporting the Democratic nominee and finding other ways to continue to fight for Michigan, for working people and for our democracy," Totten said in a statement.

With Totten's departure from the race, only McDonald and Washtenaw County Prosecutor Eli Savit remain in the Democratic primary.

On the Republican side, Eaton County Prosecutor Doug Lloyd and Birmingham attorney Kevin Kijewski are running for their party's nomination. The Michigan Republican Party endorsement convention, where delegates will choose an attorney general nominee, is set for March 28.

The UAW's Community Action Program on Monday announced its endorsement of McDonald for the attorney general nomination. She previously had nabbed an endorsement from the Michigan Education Association. Both are powerful endorsements in the Democratic primary for attorney general ahead of the party's April 19 endorsement convention.

The UAW also endorsed Democratic Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist for secretary of state, shortly after he dropped his bid for governor and entered the SOS race.

"The UAW's support is never automatic," UAW Region 1 Director LaShawn English said in a statement Monday.

"In times like these, we look past party lines and focus on one thing: electing leaders who will stand up to the billionaires and fight for union families."

Allegan County offers free radon test kits

By TRIBUNE STAFF

ALLEGAN — January is Michigan Radon Awareness Month and the Allegan County Health Department has free radon test kits available year-round for county residents.

According to a news release, The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy estimates that between 18 to 20 percent of homes in Allegan County exceed the Environmental Protection Agency's recommended action level of four picocuries per liter.

"While the majority of the county falls below this action level, it is still recommended that all homes be tested for radon," the release stated.

Radon is a naturally occurring, radioactive gas that forms when the element radium decays in the ground. Radon does not react to most materials, allowing it to move through the ground and into buildings. It is colorless, odorless, tasteless and undetectable without proper equipment.

"Radon is carcinogenic, meaning it can cause cancer and is the second leading cause of lung cancer in Michigan," the release stated. "The longer a person is exposed to radon, the higher the chances are of developing cancer."

Kits must be sent to a lab to get the results – postage and lab testing costs are covered through the test kits from the Allegan County Health Department.

The tests are available from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday at 3255 122nd Ave, Allegan, MI.

The tests are also available at local libraries while supplies last including:

- Ransom District Library, 180 S Sherwood Ave, Plainwell, MI 49080
- Fennville District Library, 400 W Main St, Fennville, MI 49408
- Leighton Township Library, 4451 12th St, Wayland, MI 49348
- Allegan Library, 331 Hubbard St, Allegan, MI 49010
- Henika District Library, 149 S Main St, Wayland, MI 49348
- Saugatuck/Douglas Library, 174 Center St, Douglas, MI 49406

"It is important to research any professional before hiring them," the release stated. "Look for an individual certified by either the National Radon Proficiency Program or the National Radon Safety Board."

For a comprehensive guide on testing a home for radon, go to The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy's radon testing page.

For additional information on radon, resources and testing, go to the department's webpage, as well as www.mi.radon.com.

A comprehensive guide on how to keep households safe from radon is also available on the department's website.

ALPACT plans to regroup with new energy

By LOUISE WREGE
Paxton Media Group

BENTON HARBOR — As tensions mount nationally between the community and law enforcement at the federal level, it's important to keep the communication lines open.

That's according to Elvin Gonzalez, a member of Berrien County ALPACT and the Family Division administrator for Berrien County Trial Court.

"There's been some pretty noteworthy events, tragic events, unfortunately. Thankfully, we have not experienced that, necessarily, here in our county – but we're just a story away from something like that happening," Gonzalez said Tuesday during the Berrien County ALPACT (Advocates and Leaders for Police and Community Trust) meeting.

He said there needs to be a balance between upholding law and order and protecting and honoring the First and Fourth Amendments.

"How do we support, encourage (and) open the lines of communication to have respectful and spirited debate when it needs to be, but also at the same time understanding each other's role and responsibilities?" he said.

New state liaison

On Tuesday, ALPACT welcomed its new liaison with the state – Kimberley Williams, a civil rights specialist with the Michigan Department of Civil Rights.

Williams said she has previously served with ALPACT chapters in Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids.

"I am here to be a support for you in the work that you do and to see how the experiences and partnerships that I have through my personal connections (and) through my work connections in the MDCR can serve you as you do this great work on behalf of your community," she said.

Elizabeth McCree, a local attorney and former ALPACT co-chair, said many of the community partners and law enforcement agencies have stopped attending ALPACT meetings.

Williams said when she took over ALPACT in Grand Rapids, it was almost dead.

"People were like, 'We've been talking and we've been talking and we're sick of talking. We don't want to be a part of another organization to just come and talk about a problem,'" Williams said.

She said she got them back to the table by building personal relationships and making a commitment to them that ALPACT would not just be about talk, but would work on solutions.

"Grand Rapids (ALPACT) is thriving now," she said.

Williams said they should reach out to the organizations that used to attend and let them know how they plan to do things differently to move the work forward.

"I think that will get people back to the table," she said.

Push to end property taxes in some states

By JEFF AMY
Associated Press

Mike Stewart / AP file photo
A "For Sale" sign is displayed outside a home, Feb. 1, 2024, in Aceworth, Ga.

ATLANTA — It is a goal spreading among anti-tax crusaders – eliminate all property taxes on homeowners.

Rising property values have inflated tax bills in many states, but ending all homeowner taxes would cost billions or even tens of billions in most states. It is unclear if lawmakers can pull it off without harming schools and local governments that rely on the taxes to provide services.

Officials in North Dakota say they are on their way, using state oil money. Wednesday, Republicans in the Georgia House unveiled a complex effort to phase out homeowner property taxes by 2032. In Florida, GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis says that is his goal, with lawmakers currently considering phasing out nonschool property taxes on homeowners over 10 years. And in Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott says he wants to eliminate property taxes for schools.

Republicans are echoing those who say taxes, especially when the taxman can seize a house for nonpayment, mean no one truly owns property.

"No one should ever face the loss of their home because they can't pay rent to the government," Georgia Republican House Speaker Jon Burns of Newington said Wednesday.

An election-year tax revolt

These audacious election-year efforts could be joined by ballot initiatives in Oklahoma and Ohio to eliminate all property taxes. Such initiatives were defeated in North Dakota in 2024 and failed to make the ballot in Nebraska that year, although organizers there are trying again. Another initiative in Michigan may also fail to make the ballot.

"We're very much in this property tax revolt era, which is not unique, it's not new. We've seen these revolts in the past," said Manish Bhatt, vice president of state tax policy at the Tax Foundation, a Washington D.C., group that is generally skeptical of new taxes.

Previous backlashes led to laws like California's Proposition 13, a 1978 initiative that limited property tax rates and how much local governments could increase property valuations for tax purposes.

The efforts are aimed at voters like Tim Hodnett, a 65-year-old retiree in suburban Atlanta's Lawrenceville. Hodnett's annual property tax bill rose from $2,000 to $3,000 between 2018 and 2024. He sees those figures starkly because he paid off his mortgage years ago, and he pays his taxes all at once, instead of making monthly payments.

Hodnett said he is disabled and living on $30,000 a year. He is about to get a big property tax break, because seniors in Gwinnett County are exempt from school property taxes, about two thirds of his bill. But he would love to not pay that other $1,000 too.

"It would be nice to be exempt from property taxes," Hodnett said.

Will there be replacement revenue?

The question is whether local governments and K-12 schools should be expected to cut spending, or whether they will be allowed to make up revenue from some other source.

"I think the complete elimination of the property tax for homeowners is really going to be very difficult in most states and localities around the country, and undesirable in most places," said Adam Langley, of Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, a Massachusetts nonprofit that studies land use and taxation.

Florida Chief Financial Officer Blaise Ingoglia, a Republican, has been touring the state arguing that local governments are overspending, trying to show they don't need the $19 billion in property taxes they collect from homeowners, meaning the house is their primary residence. Local governments have been disputing those figures.

North Dakota, by contrast, is using earnings from the state's $13.4 billion oil tax savings account to gradually wipe out homeowner property taxes. Last year, North Dakota's Republican-controlled Legislature expanded its primary residence tax credit from $500 to $1,600 a year. Officials in December said the tax credit wiped out property taxes for 50,000 households last year and reduced bills for nearly 100,000 more. That cost $400 million in state subsidies for the 2025 and 2026 tax years.

"It works, and we know we can build on it to provide even more relief and get property taxes to zero for the vast majority of North Dakota homeowners," Republican Gov. Kelly Armstrong said.

The situation is murkier in Texas, which has been using state surplus funds to finance property tax reductions, and under the Georgia proposal, which calls for shifting taxes around.

A shift from property to sales taxes

Burns wants Georgia to wipe out $5.2 billion in homeowner property taxes – more than a quarter of the $19.9 billion in property taxes collected in 2024, telling cities, counties and school districts to fall back on current or new sales taxes.

Not only will Burns' plan need the Republican-led Senate to agree, but it will require Democratic support to meet the two-thirds hurdle for a state constitutional amendment and then voter approval in November.

While most property taxes go to schools, the majority of sales taxes don't in some communities. It is unclear if localities would redivide sales taxes. Also, local governments and schools would remain limited to a combined 5 percent sales tax rate, atop the state's 4 percent rate. Some schools and governments might not be able to raise sales taxes enough to recover lost revenue.

Georgia would go from currently shielding $5,000 in home value from taxation to $150,000 in 2031 before abolishing most homeowner property taxes in 2032. The plan would limit yearly property tax revenue growth to 3 percent on other kinds of property.

Local governments would able to send homeowners a yearly bill for specified services such as garbage pickup, street lighting, stormwater control and fire protection, but lawmakers aren't calling that a tax. Voters could also approve assessments for government or school improvements. Authors said they haven't yet decided if property owners could lose homes for unpaid assessments.

Burns also wants to spend about $1 billion to cut property tax bills in 2026, but it is unclear whether Republican Gov. Brian Kemp will agree. A spokesperson declined comment.

Georgia previously tried to limit how much home values could rise for tax purposes, one common approach nationwide. But a majority of school districts and many other local governments have opted out. Georgia's senators are still pursuing that approach, with a Senate committee on Wednesday voting to make the limit mandatory.

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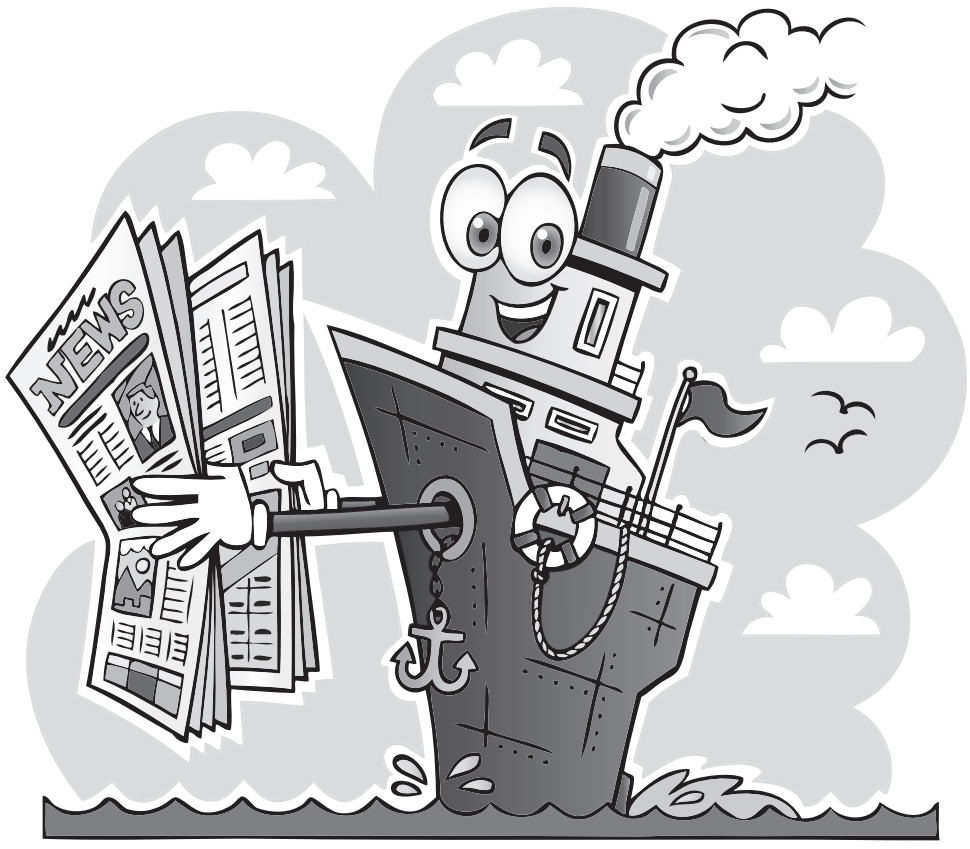

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0900 LEGALS

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS
Senior Services of Van Buren County ("SSVBC") and South Haven Charter Township are issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for Development Services to develop a parcel of land, approximately 1.3 acres, located at 08729 M 140, South Haven, MI into new affordable housing for seniors. The property is currently owned by SSVBC. Proposals are being requested from interested experienced development partners that would develop the land as affordable housing for seniors. Proposals are due electronically to SSVBC by 5pm on Feb 20, 2026. Please visit South Haven Charter Township's website at https://southhaventwp.com to view the RFP for more detail or in person at the Township Office or Senior Services of Van Buren County South Haven office for detailed information:
South Haven Charter Twp Hall
09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy
South Haven, MI 49090
Senior Services of Van Buren County, 8337 M-140,
South Haven, MI 49090

People DO Read Small Ads. You Did!

SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Photo provided / Tom Renner

Ja'Niyah Langston looks to pass to teammate in game against Zeeland West.

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: "Over and Under the Snow" by Kate Messner and Christopher Silas Neal StoryWalk available from Jan. 1 to Feb. 28. Call to schedule an appointment.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

February

1 – Ice Breaker Festival

3 – Scott Club: A Century of Black History Commemorations at 1 p.m. at the First Congregational Church at 651 Phoenix Street.

3 – Swimming: Boys varsity against Plainwell Schools at 6 p.m.

4 – Basketball: Girls middle school team against Black River Public School at 4 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

4 – Basketball: Girls freshman team against Portage Northern High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

4 – Basketball: Girls middle school team against Watervliet High School at 5 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

5 – Basketball: Boys freshman team against Fennville High School at 4 p.m. at Lakeside Social.

5 – Bowling: Boys and girls varsity teams against Coloma High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

5 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity team against Fennville High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

5 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity team against Fennville High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

5 – Wrestling: Boys and girls teams at 5:30 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

6 – South Haven Memorial Library: Play-Dough Play Date at 11 a.m. free event for preschoolers.

10 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity team against Saugatuck High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

10 – Basketball: Girls varsity team against Saugatuck High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

11 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

11 – Bowling: Boys and girls varsity team against Quincy High School at 4 p.m. at Lakeside Social.

11 – Basketball: Girls middle school team against Comstock Schools at 4:30 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

11 – Basketball: Girls middle school team against Fennville High School at 5:30 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

12 – South Haven Indivisible: Watch the film "God and Country" produced by Rob Reiner. The documentary explores Christian Nationalism's threat to democracy and its distortion of faith for political power. At First congregational Church UCC from 7 to 9 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys freshman team against New Buffalo High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

12 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity team against Bridgman Public School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

12 – Swimming: Boys varsity team against Allegan Public School at 6 p.m. at South Haven High School.

12 – Basketball: Girls varsity team against Bridgman Public School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

16 – Basketball: Girls middle school team against Watervliet High School at 4 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

16 – Basketball: Girls middle school team against Coloma High School at 5 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

17 – Scott Club: A Quilting Journey at 1 p.m. at the First Congregational Church at 651 Phoenix Street.

18 – Basketball: Boys freshman team against Otsego High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

18 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity team against Otsego High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

18 – Basketball: Boys varsity team against Otsego High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play Fridays for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon. Wear clothes that can get messy.

20 – Basketball: Girls varsity team against Allegan Public School at 6 p.m. at South Haven High School.

20 – Basketball: Boys varsity team against Allegan Public School at 7:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

21 – Al-Van Humane Society: Fur Ball 2026: Breakfast at Tiffany's fundraiser event at the Black River Barn.

21 – Basketball: Girls middle school team in the 6th grade Jamboree at 10 a.m. at Baseline Middle School.

24 – Brookside Farms: Meet and greet with Van Buren County District Court Judge candidate Rachel Keeley from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m.

24 – Basketball: Girls freshman team against St. Joseph High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

24 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity team against Watervliet High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

24 – Basketball: Girls varsity team against Watervliet High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

25 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

26 – Basketball: Girls freshman team against Hasting High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

26 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity team against Berrien Springs High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

26 – Basketball: Girls varsity team against Berrien Springs High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

27 – Swimming: Boys varsity championship meet.

27 – South Haven Memorial Library: Parent Cafes from 11 a.m. to noon. Snacks and engaging conversation about self-care, support and community resources. Free event. Kids can enjoy Stuffed Animal Story Time with the library staff during the event.

28 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club at 11 a.m.

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Woman who stole identities to work in health care is sentenced

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KALAMAZOO — A woman who stole identities to work as a nurse or physician's assistant in multiple states has been sentenced to more than six years in federal prison.

U.S. Attorney Tim VerHey in western Michigan said it was a "happy accident" that Leticia Gallarzo didn't harm anyone while starting intravenous lines, distributing medications, removing catheter lines and supervising others.

Gallarzo pleaded guilty in 2023 to identity theft after she was accused of creating a false nurse's license and other credentials to work at a Michigan nursing home. This followed a conviction and prison sentence a few years earlier for impersonating a nurse in Texas.

Authorities said Gallarzo left Michigan in 2024 while awaiting her sentence and worked in the Chicago area as a physician's assistant under the license and identity of another person. She was finally caught last September near Los Angeles where she again was working as a nurse despite failing to have real credentials.

U.S. District Judge Paul Maloney sentenced Gallarzo to more than six years in prison on Tuesday. Defense lawyer Rachel Frank said Gallarzo has a history of mental health struggles.

"She loved taking care of people, and felt she was doing something important. However, she now recognizes that her conduct, especially after being punished for it in the past, is unacceptable, and that her reasons for committing this offense are irrelevant," Frank said in a court filing.

SOUTH HAVEN SPORTS

Photo provided / Tom Renner

South Haven's LyNique Cunningham drives the lane during Wednesdays game against Zeeland West.

CANDIDATES

From page A1

them roaming around your streets?" Rogers said on a Breitbart podcast. "That's what this comes down to."

Rogers has also called Good's killing a "horrible tragedy" and said it should be investigated.

"I think any police shooting should always be investigated. That's standard procedure," he told The Detroit News earlier this month. "But the best way to avoid this is to not disobey a police officer in the legal function of their duties. … This isn't fun and games. These guys want to go home to their families at the end of the day."

The debate over ICE's aggressive tactics in local communities has quickly become a contentious issue in this year's midterm election campaigns, as polling shows voters around the country expressing unease with agents' use of force against protesters, wearing masks and arresting, injuring or killing U.S. citizens. ICE has countered that its agents also have been met with violent behavior.

Illegal immigration "was a winning issue in 2024 for the Trump campaign and other Republicans because Americans are concerned about border security and unrestricted illegal immigration. That is a real concern for Americans. But so are their constitutional rights," said consultant Adrian Hemond, a Democrat and CEO of the firm Grassroots Midwest.

"The Trump administration is speed running – turning one of their strongest issues into one of their worst issues. It's taken about a year. It's wild to see an issue move that fast."

Vice President JD Vance said during a Thursday visit to Minneapolis that the Trump administration wanted to "turn down the chaos" a lot in the area after clashes between agents and protesters, saying most of the problems were from a few "far-left agitators" harassing ICE officers.

Vance called on city and state leaders in Minnesota to allow police to better cooperate with federal officers to keep enforcement efforts more targeted to violent criminals. He also said federal agents who "violate the law" would face disciplinary action, but that they would not be "judged in the court of public opinion," according to the Washington Post.

El-Sayed seeks abolishment

El-Sayed, the former health director for Wayne County, traveled to Minneapolis in mid-January and described the Upper Midwest city as traumatized, besieged and "constantly looking over its shoulder."

EI-SAYED

He maintained that ICE has proven that it's beyond repair because agents have been equipped with heavy weaponry and face masks and told they're protected by immunity for their actions. He challenged his fellow Democrats to "take on the immorality of this."

"The express reasoning for having ICE is to keep people safe in their homes and in their communities. If ICE is shooting 37-year-old moms in the face, clearly it is not meeting its responsibility. In fact, it has become the thing from which people need to be kept safe," El-Sayed told The Detroit News.

"I called for this in 2018 because you could see how the president was coming to recognize that this could become a paramilitary force that answers only to him to normalize the use of state violence on peaceful streets."

El-Sayed acknowledged that his abolish-ICE position isn't the "politically safe" stance in a competitive field.

"But is it safe for our country when you've got armed thugs running around with rifles and checking people's paperwork? No," El-Sayed said.

"So anybody who tells you that their political convenience is more important than moral clarity about this issue, I question what kind of morals they're operating under in the first place."

Stevens moves to impeach Noem

El-Sayed criticized Stevens for taking a House vote expressing "gratitude" to ICE agents last June, describing her vote as "just the dumbest bull----." The broader resolution at issue condemned the June 1 antisemitic attack in Boulder, Colorado.

Stevens defended her vote.

"I take antisemitic violence very seriously, and I will always vote to condemn it," Stevens told The News. "There was a cynical line in the resolution meant to divide us, but I refuse to be divided on calling out antisemitism."

Stevens and McMorrow both contended that the best approach is to reform ICE, rather than eliminate it, with both emphasizing that Michiganians do want to see immigration laws enforced by the government, but in a sensible, humane way.

"ICE is out of control. These violent and untrained officers must listen to local officials and leave Minneapolis immediately. Their actions are making people less safe every day," Stevens posted on social media after Saturday's shooting.

Stevens called ICE a "mismanaged," lawless federal agency and blamed Noem for "perpetuating chaos" as the congresswoman signed onto a resolution laying out articles of impeachment against Noem drawn up by Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Illinois.

In Michigan's delegation, Democratic Reps. Rashida Tlaib and Shri Thanedar of Detroit have also signed on.

"The Homeland Security secretary has been lying. She has been stonewalling Congress, weaponizing federal power, and all of that has been deeply disturbing and concerning," Stevens said, adding that Noem hasn't answered questions from lawmakers about Good's death or that of a Chicago man who died in a Michigan detention facility.

"I'd like to start with Secretary Noem stepping down and accountability for this agency. We've got masked ICE agents running around, terrorizing neighborhoods. I'm hearing from Michiganders all over our state worried that what's happening in Minneapolis could come here," she added.

While Stevens disagreed with El-Sayed's call to abolish ICE, "it's very clear that we need serious checks on ICE and how it's operating under the Trump administration with their abuses of power."

That's partly why she voted Thursday against fiscal 2026 funding for Noem's agency, along with all but seven House Democrats. The bill still passed 220-207.

McMorrow favors squeezing ICE's budget

McMorrow pushed for Democrats in Congress to more strategically wield their government-funding power to force GOP lawmakers to negotiate changes that would return ICE to the job it was created to do.

McMORROW

"The strongest tool that you have in front of you as Democrats and as people who want to reform this agency is the budget," McMorrow said. "Force the reforms that you want to see in the budget as a contingent to receive the funding that the agency is looking for."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York issued a statement after Saturday's shooting saying that Senate Democrats would not vote to advance a government funding bill this week if it includes Department of Homeland Security funding. "What's happening in Minnesota is appalling – and unacceptable in any American city," Schumer said.

Like Stevens, McMorrow said abolishing ICE isn't the way to go, in part because there needs to be a government agency to enforce immigration laws on the books.

"This agency is out of control, but I'm somebody who believes you fix it from the inside," she said. "You reform, you overhaul this agency, so that it does the job of keeping our community safe. Because that's what Michiganders are asking for, and I believe we should be enforcing our laws."

In the meantime, McMorrow said the Michigan Senate Democrats are discussing how they might respond to ICE's tactics in the state, including the news last week that an agency memo from last year tells officers that they may enter a person's home to arrest them without a judicial warrant.

Legislation has already been introduced in Lansing to prohibit ICE agents from wearing masks and require them to wear identification. McMorrow said state lawmakers are also looking at prohibiting entry without a warrant.

"This is new territory for a lot of us. We all believe this is illegal. How are they allowed to do this?" she said.

"That's what we're exploring right now for what we are able and allowed to do as a state, or even trying anything that we can to push back. Because, frankly, they're violating states' rights by going beyond the state-level protections for privacy and safety and security."

The Spotlight

A Weekly Guide To Services & Business Around Town.

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Meet our Pet of the Week, Chickpea!

Chickpea is a 4-year-old cat with a story, a sparkle of sass, and a whole lot of heart. She has been with Al-Van for over a year, patiently waiting for the right person to appreciate her big personality and independent spirit.

When Chickpea first arrived, she had already been through more than most. An old injury to one of her front legs meant it needed to be removed, and she was also heartworm positive. Since then, she has completed two rounds of heartworm treatment and proven that having three legs has not slowed her down one bit. Chickpea is resilient, confident, and fully aware that she is the main character. This girl has opinions and she is not shy about them. Chickpea enjoys attention on her terms and will loudly let you know when it is time for head scratchies. Churu treats are a guaranteed way to her heart, and once you are in her good graces, she is an absolute joy to be around.

Chickpea would prefer to be the only cat in the home so she can soak up all the attention, but she does well with dogs and can coexist comfortably with canine companions. She is looking for a home that respects her independence, appreciates her sass, and is ready to love a cat who has overcome a lot and come out stronger

Fur Ball 2026
Fur Ball 2026 is almost here. Join Al-Van Humane Society on February 21st for Breakfast at Tiffany's, a glamorous evening inspired by Audrey Hepburn herself. Enjoy dinner, a cash bar, live and silent auctions, and a high-energy dueling piano show, all in support of homeless pets. Tickets are limited, so don't wait. Get yours now at al-van.org/furball and be part of one of the most anticipated nights of the season.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Purina dry dog and puppy food

FOCUS

Addicted to your phone?

Don't break up with it entirely – do this instead

By DEBORAH VANKIN
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

It's that time of year again: detox season. While many of us enter the new year embracing Dry January (to reduce alcohol intake) or doing juice cleanses (for weight loss), others try "digital detoxes," staying off of their devices more than usual or entirely to kick off 2026 with renewed energy and focus.

But what happens when the detox is over and the chorus of text pings, slack dings and social media notifications swells throughout the rest of the year?

Digital detoxes don't work, says author Paul Leonardi, a professor of technology management at UC Santa Barbara, because they're temporary fixes that don't address our underlying tendencies and tech habits. Which is concerning because we're drowning in digital connectivity these days – to other people, to news and information, to online data – and that can lead to a condition known as "digital exhaustion," as Leonardi calls it.

The symptoms? Drained energy, lack of focus, a sense of aimlessness when scrolling online and dread over returning "even just one more email," he says.

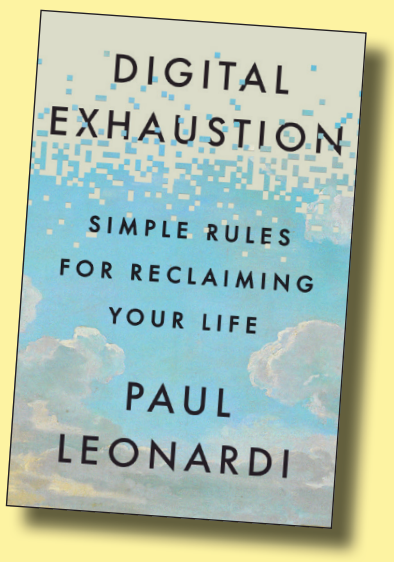
That's compounded by the havoc device overuse wreaks on our bodies: staring at a computer screen all day causes eye fatigue, scrolling on our phones endlessly can cause "tech neck," the blue wavelengths from screens disrupt our circadian rhythms, leading to poor sleep quality.

But if digital detoxes don't work, what does?

Leonardi's new book, "Digital Exhaustion: Simple Rules for Reclaiming Your Life," focuses on reshaping our relationship with technology in the long-term, helping readers develop healthier tech use habits so that breaking up with your phone isn't necessary in the first place.

Think of Leonardi as a therapist and his book a couples counseling couch on which you sit with your partner, a hyperactive nonstop-chattering smartphone.

"A therapist doesn't say, 'here is the answer,' right?'" Leonardi says. "A therapist tells you: 'Here are a bunch of different things that you could do, and which one is going to work best depends on your particular situation.' That's really what this whole book is about."



Riverhead Books / TNS
"Digital Exhaustion" by Paul Leonardi.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How do we know we're suffering from digital exhaustion and how is it different from general burnout?

General burnout, as we apply it to our jobs, is like: "I'm done with this job." You know, "the job is killing me." Digital exhaustion is a piece of burnout. It's this overwhelming feeling that "there's too much for me to process and it feels too overwhelming for me to constantly be paying attention to all of the tools, all of the information inputs, all of the requests that I'm getting from so many different sources."

The first big symptom is apathy. "I don't really care about doing this job very well. I don't really care about returning this call." A second one is a sense of hopelessness. Like: "No matter how much I do, there's always going to be more. I could spend all day and my email would never go down." It's like Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill. The third is almost like the moth to the flame. "I know that this thing is really putting me in a bad mood and it's making me feel fatigue and I should step away from it, but I also can't." It's this constant, almost vicious cycle.

How is social media especially digitally exhausting?

It's a drain on our attention. Social media – all technology, but social media in particular – forces us to constantly disconnect our attention from one thing and place it on something else. And having to disconnect and reconnect constantly is a huge driver of exhaustion. Then there's inference. Inference is the sort of effect that happens when we're constantly trying to put all of the pieces together when we get little fragments of data and information. We're like detectives putting the pieces together. That happens when we're seeing somebody's social post and we're trying to figure out, implicitly, are they a good person? Are they being mean? Are they friendly? Is their life amazing? Also, when we're trying to make inferences about what other people think of us based on our own social posts: "Do they think that I'm being haughty because I put this piece of information out there?" We never see the full picture, and putting those puzzle pieces together is exhausting. Finally: It's a real conduit to our emotions. It creates feelings of anxiety in us, feelings of fear, feelings of anger, but also feelings of excitement. And the experiencing of all that emotion is a source of exhaustion.

You say that we switch between apps and online platforms about 1,200 times per day, on average. What does this "digital switching," as you call it, do to our brains – and how can we protect ourselves?

Disconnecting and reconnecting our attention is very cognitively taxing. As we move across apps and platforms and websites, we constantly have to reorient. Even if you're switching [between] something as seemingly innocuous as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, that little switch means "oh, the share your screen button is in a different place." And the fact that you have to think about that, there's a little bit of stress associated with it.

"Tool auditing" helps. The more that we can reduce the number of switches we have to make, the better off we are. So if you can become accustomed to doing your video conferencing on Zoom and not have to use Zoom one time and Microsoft Teams another time and Webex another time, that's an easy way of reducing the switching costs that end up sapping our attention. [Also], "single thread living." The more that we can push things into one channel, the less switches we'll have to do. And the more that we can stay in a trajectory of work – or in a set of similar tasks – the less switching we have to do. So if I'm a professor preparing for a class, and I'm doing research on a paper and I'm putting together a presentation and I'm creating lecture notes, I might be on different applications. But the fact that it's all in service of the same general task, which is to prepare for my lecture, the research shows it reduces the fatigue associated with switching.

How is digital exhaustion changing family life? In the book, you talk about parents being overwhelmed by never-ending coordination on group chats, school apps, carpooling texts.

Part of the problem is that because we have all these instantaneous connections, people feel like they can make more last-minute changes. So you can get on your team sports app, and 'Oh, we're going to change the color of socks for this game for our soccer team.' We wouldn't have done that 15 years ago because you couldn't have texted and gotten a hold of everybody on the team so immediately to ask them to change their socks. We ask much more of people now, and then it requires us to attend more to all of these devices and apps and everything – which is really exhausting. There's also the dread that many parents feel that they're setting a bad example for their kids by being on their devices so much all the time.

What are some guidelines for raising healthy kids in the 21st century?

One of the things I think is really important is to make sure that you're demonstrating, and you're role modeling, good behavior with your devices and platforms. So if you're mindlessly on your phone, your kids will mindlessly be on their phones. And you're also sending a signal to them that whatever's on the other side of your phone is more important than they are. And kids watch that and they observe and they pick up on those signals. What really is important is the quality time that we're spending as parents with our kids – that we're with them and not on our devices. And that sends a strong signal about our values.

Does AI exacerbate digital exhaustion or is it a potential solution?

At the moment, I think it's mostly exacerbating it by giving us so much extra content to pay attention to. Just because it's so easy for everyone to create content on a whim. Also, talk about technology is exhausting. We are constantly bombarded with reports about AI and all these predictions about how AI is going to take away our jobs and change our relationships. It's exacerbating the problem of exhaustion. Where it could really help is, if the tools could make better predictions about what information we need to do [a task]. That stops us from having to pause in our work and get on another application or search engine to find something. That's where it has real potential and promise for helping us to reduce our exhaustion.

Your book is full of practical strategies for staving off digital exhaustion. What are some of your favorites?

On Zoom, turn off your self-view. We end up paying an undue amount of attention to ourselves and worrying about how we're presenting ourselves to others. It's like if we walked around with a mirror in front of ourselves all day long. Another one is to have really good intentionality around what you're doing on your devices. So when you pick up your phone, have an end goal in mind – "I'm picking up my phone because I need to check the weather." If you don't, then it's very easy to get sucked into the next thing and the next thing.

A third: Treat coordination as a big problem to solve all at once rather than little problems to solve in the moment. A fourth: complementary opposites. Pair intense digital work activities with the use of your body, your hands and the physical world. The more people do that, they find that the less they want to get back on their devices.

One last strategy: Think about controlling your visibility. We've been conditioned to lead these very public digital lives by posting everything and highlighting all of our accomplishments. But the more we do that, the more things there are for us to pay attention to and the more worries we have about how other people are perceiving us. So turn off read receipts, typing indicators, analytics that make us feel watched. That's how, partly, we control our visibility. And remember: Our technologies are not inherently good or bad. It's up to us to figure out how do we orient to our tools in ways that are going to give us their benefits without wearing us out. That's really the core message of the book.

Thatphichai Yodsri / Getty Images

Photos by Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times / TNS

Motorcyclists lean into a turn on Dec. 14, 2025, in Agoura Hills, California. The closure of the Snake was welcomed by many nearby residents, even as car fans mourned.

The *daredevils* are back with a *vengeance* on *Mulholland*

By CLARA HARTER
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Evan Sawyer, a.k.a. the Canyon Carver, left, and Doug Baron are car enthusiasts who frequently drive Mulholland Highway, shown here on Dec. 14, 2025, in Agoura Hills, California.

LOS ANGELES — Its serpentine curves have entranced drivers for decades, and even lured some to their death.

For motorcycle and car enthusiasts, riding the hair-raising turns of the 2.4-mile section of Mulholland Highway known as "the Snake" can feel akin to a religious experience.

When the road reopened after a nearly seven-year closure in December, its devotees returned in droves.

"It is so gratifying, so tactual, it clears my head and reinvigorates my soul," said Malibu resident Doug Baron, who fell in love with the canyon road while cruising it alongside childhood friend Chad McQueen in the late 1970s.

But locals who live at the base of this motorsports mecca have a very different view of the Snake.

"It's always been loud. It's always been reckless – now, it's come back with a vengeance," said Cristina Lopez, a 22-year resident of Seminole Springs Mobile Home Park. Her home faces the start of the route, which winds through the Santa Monica Mountains just outside Agoura Hills, roughly between Kanan and Sierra Creek roads.

Although many drivers come to enjoy the sweeping canyon views at a respectful speed, the route also attracts adrenaline junkies and social media clout chasers – who residents say have transformed the road outside their tranquil, Stars Hollow -esque community into a racetrack.

"Race car driving is like sex. Most men think they're good at it, and they're really not," Jay Leno, a noted car and motorcycle collector, told The Times. Drawn by the strong community of motorsports enthusiasts, the former "Tonight Show" host has also been coming to the Snake for decades, and noted that it's often the case that a few bad drivers ruin the fun for everyone.

Lopez struggles to sleep through the night as engines rev outside her window at all hours. She and her fellow residents, many of them seniors, are fearful of collisions as they exit the park. Some have taken to wearing reflective yellow jackets when crossing the intersection, which is near the base of a blind turn and has no stop sign or crosswalk.

After watching the Woolsey fire consume 110 of the 215 homes in the park, Lopez worries her community is one fiery crash away from another disastrous blaze.

The Snake was heavily damaged in the 2018 wildfire, which warped a bridge at its base and fried the asphalt. Rainstorms that winter swept entire sections of the damaged road away.

Where the roar of modified engines once echoed off of canyon walls, silence fell.

With Mulholland Highway closed just beyond the Seminole Springs community, local residents were in heaven. Car enthusiasts were in agony.

For owners of two historic institutions along the Snake – the Rock Store, a biker hangout founded in 1961; and the Old Place, a restaurant and beloved car gathering spot opened by writer-actor Tom Runyon in 1970 – the closure brought an uneasy quiet.

And for Los Angeles County, it provided temporary relief from a decades-long problem of dangerous and deadly accidents.

The road reopened to pedestrians and cyclists in 2020. And on Dec. 2, the time finally came to let the motors return.

"We have kept this road closed following the Woolsey fire for as long as state law allows," L.A. County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath said in a statement. "State law requires public roads to reopen once repairs are made, and the road doesn't currently satisfy the criteria for closure."

The county has implemented new safety measures such as rumble strips, reflective pavement markers and bright yellow signs marking the road's curves, as well as stepped-up traffic enforcement.

The L.A. County Sheriff's Department issued 124 citations to drivers on the Snake from Dec. 2 to 17 alone. Most were for speeding or unsafe driving. There was also one DUI arrest and a viral incident of a car flying off the road. The person survived the crash. The car did not.

Social media videos have contributed to teeming crowds, especially on weekends. At the same time, new car technologies such as advanced suspension systems that smooth the ride, anti-lock brakes, paddle-shift transmission to speed acceleration, and steering-wheel controls have made it easier for anyone to drive like a racer – even if they lack the skills and experience.

Though the influence of Instagram Reels and the latest technical innovations are new to the Snake, the history of motorsports culture in this unincorporated area of the county called Cornell is 100 years old.

Founded in 1911, the quaint mountainside community of Cornell quickly became a popular destination for those seeking to escape the bustle of the city – be it through a visit to Lake Enchanto, a dip in the Seminole Hot Springs or a ride through the canyon's dirt roads.

Among its early fans was racecar builder Harry Miller, who designed cars that won the Indianapolis 500 nine times. From 1926 to 1933, Miller hosted Prohibition-era parties in his Cornell house, where he also kept a garage for experimenting with new inventions.

"It's fascinating to me that an automotive genius and self-taught designer had his weekend retreat and was tinkering with cars out in Cornell, right along the highway that today is a motorsports mecca," said local historian Brian Rooney.

■■■

In 1924, two years before Miller took up his Cornell residence, William Mulholland celebrated the opening of his namesake road winding 24 miles from the Hollywood Hills through the Santa Monica Mountains to Calabasas.

The road was intended to provide city dwellers with access to the gorgeous natural resources in the mountains. Four years later, the full 55-mile route was completed, extending through Malibu to the ocean.

During the sports-car-racing boom of the 1950s, Los Angeles' first-ever purpose-built racing track opened just off Mulholland Highway on the famous western-movie set Paramount Ranch. The course was only open in 1956 and 1957, as a string of serious accidents and three deaths prompted insurers to cancel coverage.

In 1961, Ed and Veronica Savko opened the Rock Store in a building that was a former stagecoach stop. It quickly became a gathering spot for motorcycle enthusiasts and over the years attracted celebrities such as Leno, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tommy Lee and Harrison Ford.

In 1970, another institution was born just down the street. Tom Runyon and his wife, Barbara, purchased the shuttered Hank's Country Store & Cornell Post Office and transformed it into the Old Place restaurant.

The establishment was a favorite of Steve McQueen and wife Ali MacGraw in the '70s, when Bob Dylan could occasionally be found hunched over his guitar in a dark corner. Today, it remains a beloved meet-up spot for car enthusiasts, especially on Sunday mornings, when you can find everything from a 1960 Porsche to a 2026 Lamborghini parked in its lot.

During the 1980s, the Snake became the go-to spot for motorcycle racing in the canyons. A bull's-eye was painted on "Splat Rock" near a sharp turn in the road often referred to as Dead Man's Curve.

In August 1989, five months after a motorcyclist died at Splat Rock, the county launched a pilot program to limit the Snake to resident-only access on the weekends in an effort to reduce crashes and illegal racing.

The program came after residents at Seminole Springs Mobile Home Park, where Lopez lives today, collected 400 signatures seeking a solution to the racing problem.

"There are people who would not go to church because they were afraid to leave the park," resident Bonnie Couch told The Times in 1989. "Motorcyclists have a right to ride, and we have nothing against them. But when they jeopardize and endanger lives, it's a problem."

But problems on the Snake persisted through the 1990s and 2000s.

In 2009, a YouTube account called RNickeymouse began documenting motorcycle crashes on the Snake, collecting millions of views on videos showing a rider flying over the guardrail, a motorcyclist slamming into bike riders and a car smashing into a canyon wall.

Deana Kerns, a 27-year resident of Seminole Springs, said there was a "dramatic uptick" in people misusing the road around 2016, about the same time that videos of the Snake became increasingly popular on social media.

"Nobody here has a problem with regular usage, but all of a sudden it was 2 o'clock in the morning on Tuesday and Wednesday and 4 o'clock in the morning on Thursday," she said. "Yes, we live on Mulholland, but we're still entitled to sleep."

The Seminole Springs residents used a phone tree to take turns reporting the loud and dangerous driving to the California Highway Patrol and the L.A. County Sheriff's Department. In May 2016, the county Board of Supervisors voted to ban vehicles from stopping along the side of the highway in an attempt to eliminate races that drew spectators.

Then on the night of Nov. 8, 2018, an electrical failure sent sparks into dry bush near the Santa Susana Field Laboratory. Whipped by fearsome winds, the hungry blaze charged through the Santa Monica Mountains, arriving at the Snake just before dawn.

■■■

Evan Sawyer pulls his British Racing Green 2006 Lotus Elise into the turnout at the top of the Snake on a bright and dewy Sunday morning in December shortly after the road is reopened.

"Hey, it's the Canyon Carver!" someone shouts out their window as they whiz by.

Sawyer is a local celebrity, and his videos of the reopening of the Snake and the ensuing drama have received millions of views on his Canyon Carver Instagram account.

Sawyer, who admits he too enjoyed some zippy driving in his youth, is now trying to position himself as an ambassador of the car community, urging caution to fellow drivers in hopes of ensuring the road can remain open for all.

"I try to preach to people: Don't cross the mustard," he said, noting that the blind turns are too dangerous to attempt passing.

Malibu resident Baron, who has also stopped to marvel at the view in his reconstructed 1975 Porsche Carrera, agrees that drivers must be part of the solution.

"If all of us would just drive the road legally, not race it, stay in our lanes, be respectful to the community around it, I don't think it would be as big a problem," he said. "What's happening now, however, is loud cars driving too fast, hitting signs that are turn signs, going into fences, going off the road."

Parker Nirenstein, who runs a popular YouTube channel reviewing cars, said that part of the problem stems from younger drivers who are just discovering the road.

"There's this whole new crowd," he said, "and they've been told through TikTok or Instagram that this is the hype road."

Back at the base of the Snake, Cristina Lopez, Deana Kerns and her husband, Jeremy, prepare for another day of relentless noise.

"Since it reopened, it's just been an automotive roller coaster," said Jeremy. "It's a beautiful road to ride, but I don't think [drivers] understand the impact it has on everybody around them."

Jeremy describes pulling out of the mobile home park as harrowing and said he would like to see the speed limit lowered there. He fears a driver or motorcyclist whipping around the blind corner could hit someone.

Deana has taken on a role as a public advocate for residents' concerns despite the fact that speaking with the media has led to her receiving a barrage of vitriol on social media. She feels that some who post the videos purposefully stir up the tensions between drivers and locals in hopes of getting more views.

"Drama and negativity feeds that algorithm, not happiness and camaraderie," she said.

She has little optimism that racing and other risky behavior can be eliminated but would like to see the Snake limited to resident access only at night as a compromise.

Supervisor Horvath did not comment directly on whether she would consider such a step but noted that her office was working closely with the county Public Works Department, the CHP, and the Sheriff's Department to protect residents.

"I have directed safety upgrades, enhanced enforcement and data tracking," she said, "I look forward to Public Works' additional recommendations at six and 12 months."

As December drew to a close, an unusually powerful storm system soaked Los Angeles, closing some mountain roads and keeping racing behavior at bay, said Deana.

For brief periods, it was as if the Snake had been tamed.

But each time there was a break in the showers, it wasn't long until the deep and familiar motorized rumble returned.

Three best friends from childhood decided to buy a communal house together

By ZOE GREENBERG
The Philadelphia Inquirer (TNS)

The Rachels met each other when they were 5 and 6 years old, and they met Lizzy Seitel – who would come to be known as one of the Rachels despite her name – in middle school.

They all lived in the D.C. area, and one weekend they took part in a retreat with Cheder, a progressive Jewish community in the area. In Seitel's recollection, they listened to Ani DiFranco, went skinny dipping, and talked about their fears.

"It was just a really crazy, beautiful, life-affirming teenage moment," Seitel, now 38, said.

It also marked the beginnings of a very long friendship.

Soon after, Rachel (Luban), Rachel (Neuschatz), and Seitel began celebrating winter solstice together with a witchy ritual drawn from a pagan book. In the quarter-century since, they've never missed the solstice.

The Rachels went to the same college; Lizzy went elsewhere. Then, after living apart for some years in their twenties, they decided to settle down, together. By that point, Seitel had married Serge Levin (he grew up in a communal house in Rostov-on-Don, Russia and was game for an alternative arrangement) and was pregnant with their first child.

In 2022 the four bought a giant old stone house in Philadelphia's Mt. Airy neighborhood, where they now live communally. They have a shared bank account for the mortgage, house maintenance, and utilities, along with a shared backyard, basement, porch, and Google calendar.

The Rachels, who both have romantic partners living elsewhere, co-parent a dog. Seitel and Levin's two young children call the Rachels Aunt Lu and Aunt Nu.

The following, as told to Zoe Greenberg in separate interviews, have been edited for length and clarity and combined.

On meeting each other as kids

RACHEL NEUSCHATZ: I consider myself a red diaper baby [a term to describe the kids of radical/Communist parents.] We lived in a single family home, but we were always involved with the Jewish community Cheder. Rachel Luban and I were in it starting from age 5.

LIZZY SEITEL: I grew up in a pretty typical nuclear family, in most ways. But my parents always had an extra room, and they were always having people come stay with us. There was this feeling of people coming in and out, and I really loved that – just the idea of family being expansive.

It was always my fantasy to live in a boarding house.

RACHEL LUBAN: I feel like we raised each other, and those relationships have always felt as central to me as romantic relationships. Romantic partnership was part of my vision, but as a kid I would never dream about getting married.

On the 'palace of dreams'

LIZZY SEITEL: The Rachels and I always talked about creating a palace of dreams.

RACHEL NEUSCHATZ: We'd always talked very vaguely about living together. Of course, people loved to tell us it wouldn't work, which is a very funny, ubiquitous response.

RACHEL LUBAN: We had been talking for many years about wanting a more communal living situation, some kind of cohousing. We didn't know exactly what that would look like.

Lizzy was very rooted in Philly. She'd been here for maybe 10 years, she was married, she was pregnant.

So both Rachel and I decided to move to Philly in 2019. We moved within a month of each other, and we were all living in separate apartments in South Philly.

On choosing to buy a house together

LIZZY SEITEL: Having a kid, and then it being the pandemic, it was like, "Oh yeah, the nuclear family is b-------. This is not how anyone should raise kids."

RACHEL LUBAN: Even though we were all living in South Philly, less than a half hour walk from each other, it felt like seeing each other had to be this big planned thing and you had to clear your night for it.

We wanted lower barriers to spending time together, and more incidental interactions.

On searching for the right place

RACHEL LUBAN: There was really no roadmap, and that was very challenging. We didn't have many people to talk to. There are all of these logistics to figure out: Should we become an LLC? We decided not to do that, because then we would need a commercial mortgage.

We wanted a single structure that had separate units. So everyone has their own door, everyone has their own kitchen, but there are some common spaces, and we're all really close together.

We made our own basic boundaries about what percentage of the property each person would own and therefore, what percentage of the finances they would be responsible for.

Our runner-up was this former nunnery that was three huge conjoined West Philly rowhomes. It had one giant kitchen, 13 bathrooms, and a lot of institutional carpeting. It was kind of cool, but also just an insane space.

The place we eventually found felt like it fell from heaven, because nothing else came close.

On committing

LIZZY SEITEL: I knew that these are the people that are the most committed to me, besides Serge. I know we can fight and that we're always gonna want to come back together. There's no question of, is this friendship gonna last? We're gonna make it last.

RACHEL LUBAN: A lot of people, including lawyers, told us not to do this. They were like, "You intertwine your lives, and then somebody has a falling out, or somebody wants to move, and then you're in a mess."

In a certain way, I think it required the kind of psychological commitment that people make when they get married, where they're throwing their chips in together. Knowing that if something happens, it could be really messy.

We decided we trust each other enough to think that if something changes, everyone will act with good faith.

On their friendships now

RACHEL LUBAN: You get to know people in a different way, and your fates are more tied together. We had to replace our entire heating system, which is actually three different heating systems. There's a range of different feelings about spending money and what kind of upkeep the house needs. Even whether we should mow the lawn was a discussion that we had to have.

LIZZY SEITEL: We might not live in this house or in this arrangement for every year until we die, but we're thinking that far ahead – about aging and wanting to be together in this life. That feels like a commitment to each other's future.

RACHEL NEUSCHATZ: Probably I will not formally parent. Maybe it'll still happen, but that's not on my bucket list. Lizzy's kids are like my niblings – nieces and nephews.

On telling other people:

RACHEL LUBAN: Most people are like, "I'm jealous. I want to do that." Then a minority of people are like, "That's my personal hell."

LIZZY SEITEL: I feel like there's this thing of people not knowing that they're allowed to commit to their friends, or have their friends commit to them.

RACHEL NEUSCHATZ: I cap myself from gushing too much, because I don't want to be a jerk. But yeah, it's a goddamn paradise that we've made ourselves.

Dreamstime / TNS

HEALTH

Thrift store. Clinic. Roller rink. Center becomes 'radical' lifeline amid homelessness, drug crises

Dan Bingler, who runs the Fred Hampton Free Store, calls it "a radical community center." The store, in an abandoned Family Dollar in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward, offers visitors free items, all donated by people and groups in the community. Volunteers from other organizations often provide free basic medical care and harm reduction services on-site.

By ANERI PATTANI
KFF Health News (TNS)

NEW ORLEANS — From the outside, the abandoned Family Dollar store in the Lower 9th Ward looks intimidating. It's covered in graffiti, with aluminum cans and trash dotting the parking lot. It sits on a street with other empty lots and decayed buildings – symbols of the lasting devastation this neighborhood, one of the city's poorest, has endured since Hurricane Katrina.

But inside, the store is a welcoming oasis. Twinkly string lights adorn racks of donated clothing. Shelves and bins overflow with children's books, allergy medications, and toiletries. Curtains cordon off one side of the room, where there's a stage for musicians and a neon sign depicting roller skates for weekly free skate nights.

The space is part free thrift store, part over-the-counter pharmacy, part punk show venue – and wholly "a radical community center," said Dan Bingler, who runs the place.

Bingler is a waiter and bartender in the city who founded a mutual-aid organization called the Greater New Orleans Caring Collective. He said the building owners allow him to use the space as long as he pays the water, electricity, and trash bills.

On Monday evenings, volunteers from other community organizations show up – some used to set up in the parking lot before Bingler opened the store. They offer free testing for sexually transmitted infections, basic medical care, hot meals, and sterile syringes and other supplies for people who use drugs.

The purpose of the space is simple, Bingler said: "We're going to make sure we provide for the community."

Although it's been open for a few years now, the space has become even more crucial to this community in recent months, with the Trump administration slashing funding for many social service organizations and taking an aggressive approach to homelessness and drug use. In Washington, D.C., the administration has bulldozed tents to push people living on the street to leave the city. Nationally, it has called for people who use drugs to be forced into treatment. It has decried harm reduction – practices that public health experts say keep people who use drugs safe and alive but that critics say promote illegal drug use.

The community space in New Orleans – named the Fred Hampton Free Store after the famous Black Panther activist known for bringing together diverse groups to fight for social reforms – aims to be a haven among this sea of changes.

It doesn't receive federal funding, state or local grants, or money from foundations, Bingler said. It's simply neighbors helping neighbors, he said, tearing up and adding, "It's a really beautiful thing to be able to share all this space."

It doesn't receive federal funding, state or local grants, or money from foundations, Bingler said. It's simply neighbors helping neighbors, he said, tearing up and adding, "It's a really beautiful thing to be able to share all this space."

All items inside are provided by people or organizations in the community. Bingler said one time a local hotel undergoing renovations donated 50 flat-screen TVs.

On nights the store is open, often more than 100 people visit, Bingler said.

One fall evening, dozens of people browsed for free clothing and over-the-counter medications. Others sat on the grass outside, chatting while keeping an eye on their bicycles or grocery carts full of possessions.

James Beshears stopped by the harm reduction group in the parking lot to get sterile supplies he uses to inject heroin and fentanyl. He said he'd been in treatment for years but relapsed after his doctor moved away and he was referred to a clinic that charged $250 a day. Street drugs were cheaper than treatment, he said.

He wants to stop. But until he can find affordable care, places like the free store keep him going. Without it, he said, he'd have "one foot in the grave."

Another man in the parking lot was waiting for the arrival of Aquil Bey, a paramedic and former Green Beret well known for helping people overcome obstacles to getting health care. As soon as the man spotted Bey's black Jeep, he ran up.

"I've got stage 4 kidney disease," the man said, adding that he was scheduled for treatments at a hospital but was struggling to get there.

"Do me a favor," Bey said as he unloaded folding tables and medical equipment from his car. "When our team gets here, come and see us. Maybe we can get you transportation."

Bey is the founder of Freestanding Communities, a volunteer-run organization that provides free basic medical care and referrals for people who are homeless, using drugs, or part of other vulnerable communities. The group has a steady presence at the free store.

That day, Bey and his team connected the man needing kidney disease treatment to reduced-cost transit programs. They also did blood pressure and blood sugar checks for anyone who wanted them, cleaned infected wounds, and called clinics to make appointments for patients without phones.

A man with a leg injury mentioned he was sleeping on the concrete floor of an abandoned naval base. Bey noticed the free store's furniture section had a mattress. He and another volunteer hauled it out, strapped it to the top of a car, and delivered it to where the man was sleeping.

"We're just trying to find all these barriers" that people face and "find ways to fix them," Bey said.

The clinic at the free store helped Stephen Wiltz connect with addiction care. He grew up in the Lower 9th Ward and had been using drugs since he was 10.

Fed up with discrimination from doctors who blamed him for his addiction, Wiltz said, he was reluctant to go to any treatment facility. But after years of knowing the volunteers at the free store, he trusted them to point him in the right direction.

At 56, Wiltz was in sustained recovery for the first time in his life, he said during a phone interview in the fall.

Those volunteers "cared for people who didn't have nobody to care for them," he said.

As the sun went down that fall evening at the store, a punk band started setting up for a show across the room from the medical clinic. Lights dimmed and music blared – a reminder that this was not your everyday clinic or community center.

Bey continued consulting with a patient who had gout.

"I get used to the sound," Bey said of the rapid drums and loud power chords. "I like it sometimes."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

Photos above and at top by (Aneri Pattani / KFF Health News)

The Fred Hampton Free Store operates in an abandoned Family Dollar store in one of New Orleans' poorest neighborhoods, the Lower 9th Ward. The building, covered in graffiti, can be intimidating at first. But inside, it is warm and welcoming, stocked with clothes, books, furniture, and more, donated by community members for others to take free of charge.

On Wednesday evenings, the Fred Hampton Free Store in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward hosts free indoor roller-skating for the public.

The Fred Hampton Free Store operates in an abandoned Family Dollar store in one of New Orleans' poorest neighborhoods, the Lower 9th Ward. The building, covered in graffiti, can be intimidating at first. But inside, it is warm and welcoming, stocked with clothes, books, furniture, and more, donated by community members for others to take free of charge.

Volunteers from Freestanding Communities, a community health outreach organization, take a mattress that had been donated to the Fred Hampton Free Store and deliver it to an abandoned naval base in New Orleans, where a man with a leg injury had been sleeping on the concrete floor.

James Beshears says the Fred Hampton Free Store in New Orleansâ€™ Lower 9th Ward â€” along with the harm reduction group that distributes sterile syringes there â€” has kept him alive amid his drug use. He wants to stop but has had difficulty finding affordable treatment, he says.

ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

Dealing with warts

By CAROLENA STEINBERG, MD and DIANA H. LEE, MD, PHD, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

Nadzeya Haroshka / Dreamstime / TNS

When warts are on the bottom of the feet, doctors call them plantar warts.

Warts are small, firm bumps on the skin caused by viruses from the human papillomavirus (HPV) family. Warts are common among school-aged children but can affect people of any age.

The good news is, many kinds of warts often go away on their own without treatment. But they can become painful if they are bumped, and some children are embarrassed by them. Your pediatrician can give you advice on treatment, such as applying an over-the-counter medicine containing salicylic acid to the warts.

There are a variety of warts that a child can come into contact with and they are contracted through different methods. Human papillomaviruses are spread by close contact through direct touch or sharing objects. The virus often gets into the body through breaks in the skin.

Common skin warts are bumps with a rough surface and a yellow, tan, black, brown or gray color. They can appear anywhere on the body. However, they are most often found on the hands, including near or under the fingernails, toes, face and around the knees.

When warts are on the bottom of the feet, doctors call them plantar warts. Plantar wars are often flat and painful. Your child may say it feels like they are walking on a pebble. The warts may have tiny red or black dots on them, which are actually tiny, swollen or dead blood vessels. Warts on the bottom of the feet may happen from walking barefoot in locker rooms or around pools.

Warts on the genitals, also called condyloma, are usually spread sexually during genital, oral and anal sex with a partner who is infected. However, skin warts can also be spread to genital areas from warts on the hands or by caregivers who have warts on their hands.

Genital warts that are spread sexually are a risk for certain types of cancer and require long-term follow-up monitoring. These situations should be discussed with your health care provider.

Your doctor may refer you to a dermatologist if your child has multiple warts in many places, a wart on the face or genital area, reoccurring warts, or large, deep, or painful plantar warts. Warts can be treated at home with over-the-counter topical products such as salicylic acid solutions or pads, imiquimod cream, or 5-fluorouracil cream. Duct tape can also be used to remove some warts and can be used alone or alongside salicylic acid.

In-office procedures are also an option, especially for more troublesome warts. These include freezing treatments with a liquid nitrogen-based solution, surgical scraping or cauterization, laser treatments and local injection of certain medications.

Many warts last for months or years and then go away on their own. Warts often will go away with the treatments above, but sometimes a treated wart will come back. If a wart comes back, simply treat it again the way you did the first time, or as directed by your pediatrician.

Some wart treatments may leave a mark or scar. Patients with darker skin may be more likely to have color changes to the skin where a wart was treated. This discoloration will go away with time, but speak to your provider about the risks and benefits of each treatment.

Washing hands after being in public places and wearing shoes when outdoors and in public places will make it less likely to get a wart. Everyone in the family should also use their own towel.

To limit warts from spreading, it is best to avoid touching the wart to other parts of the body or picking the warts.

HPV vaccination prevents genital warts and might also help to prevent common warts. The HPV vaccine is recommended for children 11 years old and older, but it can be administered as early as 9 years old.

Let your pediatrician know if your child develops a wart on her face or genitals. If warts persist or spread or if they are painful, ask your pediatrician for medical advice.

Carolena Steinberg, MD, is a transitional year resident in the University of Miami Health System who will attend dermatology residency at UC San Diego. Diana H. Lee, MD, PhD, FAAP, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Dermatology, is a board-certified pediatric dermatologist and is Associate Professor of Dermatology and Pediatrics at Weill Cornell Medicine.

Researchers at Mayo Clinic use AI to predict patient falls based on core density in middle age

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK
Mayo Clinic News Network (TNS)

ROCHESTER, Minn. — Artificial intelligence applied to abdominal imaging can help predict adults at higher risk of falling as early as middle age, a new Mayo Clinic study shows. The research, published in Mayo Clinic Proceedings: Digital Health, highlights the importance of abdominal muscle quality, a component of core strength, as a key predictor of fall risk in adults aged 45 years and older.

Falls are a leading cause of injury, especially among older adults. Mayo Clinic researchers found that early markers of fall risk may be detectable in CT scans that many patients have for other reasons.

Working with radiology bioinformatics experts, they set out to determine whether AI-derived measurements of fat distribution, muscle size and density and bone quality could reveal early signs of noteworthy physical changes.

They found that muscle density, a measure of muscle quality, was a much stronger predictor of fall risk than muscle size.

"Muscle size is just a measure of how big your muscles are," says lead author Jennifer St. Sauver, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. "Muscle density is different; on a CT scan, it's a measure of how 'dark' and homogenous the muscles are."

More homogenous muscles are denser and tend to have less fat in them, Dr. St. Sauver notes.

"Previous studies have suggested that muscle density, not size, is more strongly associated with physical strength and function," she says. "Our results support the idea that we should be focusing on muscle density, not muscle size, when we try to understand physical function."

The research team expected to see links between poorer performance on abdominal muscle measures and a higher incidence of falls in older adults, but what surprised them most was the strength of these associations in middle-aged adults and how strongly those measures predicted fall risk.

"Leg muscles have been associated with physical function, but our findings show that abdominal muscles also play a significant role," Dr. St. Sauver says.

The findings underscore the importance of maintaining good core strength throughout adulthood, she adds.

"One of the most important messages from this research is to keep your abdominal muscles in the best shape possible," Dr. St Sauver says. "Doing so may provide benefits that start in midlife and continue well into older adulthood."

For tips on improving your abdominal core strength, visit mayoclinic.org.

Dry January

Hospitality industry experts discuss why they're cutting back on alcohol

Monica Casillas-Rios, bar director for the restaurant Elske in Chicago, makes a non-alcoholic cocktail there on Jan. 8.
Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune / TNS`

By LISA SHAMES
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — As Dry January wraps up, it's hard to ignore the sobering (pun intended) stories and stats on alcohol consumption. According to a 2025 Gallup poll, a record-low 54 percent of Americans reported that they consume alcohol. It was the third consecutive year the poll found declines in Americans' reported drinking. For the first time, a majority of Americans say drinking in moderation – one or two drinks a day – is bad for their health.

But it's not just average consumers who are questioning and changing their relationship with alcohol. Folks on the other side of the bar are too. Those in the hospitality industry are especially vulnerable to the downsides of drinking with easy access to alcohol, spirit brand-sponsored trips, alcohol-focused conferences and a social life that often revolves around bars.

With some 18 years of working in restaurants, including in her current role as bar director for Creepies and Elske, Monica Casillas-Rios knows all too well the allure of alcohol – the good and not-so-good. While she has always tried to be conscious of her drinking, taking off months here and there, she realized a few years back that she needed to rethink her frequent outings to bars, restaurants and after-hours clubs.

"I couldn't keep doing that financially and physically," Casillas-Rios says.

Six months ago, she committed to not drinking beyond the cocktail tasting research required to do her job. When she tastes wine, she always spits.

"As beverage professionals, this is how we make our living, but there's also a matter of how responsible are we being to ourselves," she says.

It was about a year and a half ago when Abe Vucekovich started questioning his relationship with alcohol.

"I realized there had been some real consistency to my drinking that I didn't love, including how early I was starting," says Vucekovich, who was one of the creative cocktail forces at influential bar the Violet Hour. More recently, he helped open Meadowlark, but his focus now is on Friends of Friends, where he is co-owner.

After abstaining from alcohol for a year, Vucekovich has been dipping his toe back in slowly, albeit with no plans to dive fully back in.

"I need to realize where my threshold is and I'm trying to be very gracious with myself with that process as it's messy," he says. "I've seen a lot of other operators and bar people who have either cut drinking out completely or cut back."

That's something Natalia Cardenas has also experienced.

"I'm hearing so many industry people share their journeys of scaling back or cutting out alcohol altogether," she says. "Honestly, that's something I had never heard before and every day I hear about more and more."

Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune / TNS
A Bitter & Bright, left – a non-alcoholic drink with Pathfinder, Lucano, lemon, sweet vermouth and mint – is pictured with another non-alcoholic drink named Woodsy & Bubbly, featuring with blanc vermouth, palo santo, grapefruit, sea salt and tonic, on Jan. 12 at the bar at Friends of Friends in Chicago.

Cardenas got her start behind the bar first in Miami, followed by stints at Chicago's Purple Pig and Balena. Working in spirits was never her dream, but she fell in love with the people in the industry and the history and storytelling behind wine and spirits. The travel possibilities were a plus too.

For Cardenas, health issues led to her alcohol aha moment. Eventually, her doctor recommended eliminating alcohol.

"It became increasingly harder to do my job working for a liquor supplier as there were many company outings and gatherings where alcohol was flowing," she says.

Cardenas stepped away from the industry in 2024 as she didn't know where she fit in anymore.

In early 2025, she found her way back with Pathfinder, a hemp-based nonalcoholic spirit company where she is the Midwest regional manager and sells to retail, restaurants and bars. The experience has been enlightening, says Cardenas.

"We're at a crossroads of what's actually happening and what people are consuming and what society deems is acceptable in a social setting," she says.

Kevin Canchola's career in hospitality has run the gamut from bartending at the Pump Room and the Langham, Chicago, to being a brand ambassador for Moët Hennessy and William Grant & Sons. His relationship with alcohol has been equally varied.

"There were times where I'd spent months not drinking," he says.

While working as a brand ambassador, where drinking is often an unspoken part of the job with an expense account to go along with it, Canchola began questioning his career choice.

"I maintained as much sobriety as the job would allow, and that made me resent drinking because while I would no longer overdo it, I would still feel some of the aftereffects the next day and I wouldn't feel as sharp as I wanted to be," he says. "I was trying to live up to these brands and represent them accurately, but in doing so, I wasn't representing myself."

Canchola felt conflicted in trying to represent these brands while not consuming alcohol. For a while, he kept his drinking – or lack of drinking – habit to himself.

In May he took a firm step to stop drinking, he says.

At his current gig working with Casa Lumbre, an incubator for small spirit brands based out of Mexico, Canchola is particularly excited about Almave, a new nonalcoholic blue agave spirit that's distilled like tequila minus the fermentation process, where it would become alcohol. Like some other NA spirits, Almave does contain minute amounts of alcohol.

"For the first time, I'm excited about Dry January because I get to do my job and I'm not hindered by anything," he says. "I get to celebrate with friends and maybe give them a peek into sobriety if they care to try that."

Casillas-Rios considers herself fortunate to have stepped into a strong NA program at Elske, including a nonalcoholic pairing menu, when she joined five years ago. She has leaned even more into those offerings at both Elske and Creepies.

"The category of nonalcoholic is growing so much that it is a disservice to not put it on your menu," she says.

In her role at Pathfinder, which includes an amaro-like NA spirit and a canned NA Negroni, Cardenas' renewed interactions with the operators and bartenders she has known for so long have revealed some interesting changes in the NA world, especially when it comes to verbiage.

"Mocktail" is out due to its child-like reference, while "nonalcoholic" has its naysayers because it sounds negative and "non-fun" says Cardenas. "Alcohol-free" has its fans. "Spirit-free" seems to be gaining popularity with industry folks, but that wouldn't necessarily apply to Pathfinder as it goes through a fermentation process with botanicals and a distillation to build flavor and dimension, so it's technically a spirit. (Confused yet? All of this doesn't even include the various terms for the different levels of alcohol consumption, ranging from "sober-curious" and "damp" to just plain "sober.")

"There are so many terrific alcohol-free options these days with different wines and spirits that operators can have more nuanced cocktails to cater to their guests," says Cardenas, especially important at a time when bars are seeing declines in patrons as their drinking habits change.

For those looking to extend their Dry January endeavor further or simply cut back, these industry experts have plenty of tips.

"People need to look within themselves and see what role alcohol plays in their life and whether it works for them," says Casillas-Rios. "Your relationship with sobriety is incredibly personal, but at the end of the day, we all want something better for ourselves."

"I wish it sounded more poetic, but just speak up," says Canchola, who also recommends finding a friend who's damp or sober.

"Have conversations with retail operators, bartenders and servers," says Cardenas. "If you're open with them, I can almost guarantee they're going to disclose that they've cut back themselves so they can give you the right direction."

"The biggest thing for me was pursuing therapy and other mindfulness things in my life that were not reliant on drinking," says Vucekovich, who admits the journey isn't without challenges. "Drinking can make you think of yourself differently, so when the beer goggles come off, it's a bit raw to sit with your feelings."

But there are plenty of benefits of not drinking too.

"I never realized how much of a morning person I was until I really stopped drinking," says Casillas-Rios. "At the end of the day, though, it's my livelihood. I still enjoy working in it, but I think a lot more of us have to take on that role of being advocates, not only for providing a good experience when it comes to people that are drinking, but also providing a good experience when people are not."

FINANCE

What's a billion-dollar loan really worth?

For private credit funds, it depends on who's counting

By JOSEPH DISTEFANO
The Philadelphia Inquirer (TNS)

As pension funds and other investors have cut back new privateequity investments after years of poor returns, Wall Street private equity managers such as Apollo Globa l, Blackstone, and KKR have moved more heavily into corporate lending.

They compete with banks to make loans but aren't bound by the rules that govern banks. The managers bundle the loans into private credit funds and offer them to investors as an alternative.

"Everyone has shifted to private equity," which should make investors extra careful, said Richard Vague, chairman of Pennsylvania's $80 billion school pension system, PSERS.

Scholars at Yale Law School cite estimates that private credit funds are approaching $2 trillion in assets , up from $300 billion in 2010, and they're on track to double in t he next two years.

As private credit funds have grown, analysts warn that limited information about the loans makes it hard to know what the credit funds are worth or how they would respond to a slowing economy.

For example, Philadelphia-based FS KKR Capital Corp., one of the largest and oldest private credit funds, and two of its rivals have won unwelcome attention for posting very different prices for their investments in the same Silicon Valley private-equity takeover loan.

Such ambiguity doesn't exist in publicly traded securities such as stocks, where investor assumptions are reflected in the market price at any given time. The conflicting private-credit valuations suggest analysts aren't certain about how likely the private credit funds are to get their money back or to lose money if loans default.

"Risk is on the move. We're talking trillions," Mark Pinto, head of private credit at Moody's Investors Service, told clients in a recent report.

Different from banks

While banks have rules for measuring and publicly reporting loan losses and late payments – and private credit managers say they, too, apply strict internal standards – Moody's analysts in that report called private credit loan reporting "opaque." They cited private credit risk as a rapidly growing area of concern to financial systems.

The rapid growth is new, but private credit has long history.

FS KKR was set up as a publicly traded business development company and opened to investors in 2009 by Future Standard (formerly Franklin Square), a Philadelphia-based investment firm headed by Michael Forman and cofounded by college-housing baron and Sixers co-owner David J. Adelman.

That fund is marketed by FS, but its investments are managed by staff at FS's partner, private-equity giant KKR. It invests about $20 billion of FS's total $86 billion in client assets, FS reported last year.

While FS KKR paid shareholder dividends of 70 cents a share – or most of its profits in recent quarters – shares have lately traded around $15, down from the low $20s last year, a sign that investors are concerned about prospects in a slowing economy.

In a widely reported example that points out the difficulty of measuring the value of the loans in these funds, FS KKR's share of a loan to finance the 2021 purchase of Medallia, a Silicon Valley-based customer-service software company, was listed on KKR's books last fall at 91 cents on the dollar, a discount of 9 percent to its original value,as confirmed in an SEC filing. A discount implies FS KKR has some doubt the borrower will pay its loans on time.

But a rival Apollo Global fund listed the same loan at a 23 percent discount, as if Apollo saw a significantly higher risk that Medallia wasn't going to pay.

SEC records show a third private credit fund run by real estate giant and private-credit pioneer Blackstone listed the Medallia loan at an 18 percent discount.

How can the same loan have three different values?

Detailed public reporting on Medallia's finances had almost stopped since yet another private-equity and private-credit investor, Chicago-based Thoma Bravo, paid $6.1 billion in 2021 for the company. Thoma Bravo took Medallia private and borrowed from FS KKR, Apollo, Blackstone and others to help fund the deal, Leyla Kunimoto, a former KPMG auditor notedin a post on her credit review platform, Accredited Investor Insight.

That leaves investors trying to glean intelligence from limited information or trusting fund managers with their differing views and valuations.

So what's the loan really worth?

KKR partner Daniel Pietrzak, who is both president and chief investment officer for FS KKR Capital Corp. and head of Global Credit at KKR, said pricing differences "can arise naturally" for loans that aren't publicly traded.

Factors include "variations in valuation providers, timing, policy nuances and available information," he added in a statement. So, for example, one of the investors might know something others don't.

Pietrzak said KKR pays "independent third-party valuation providers as part of a robust and consistent process, which helps ensure valuations fairly represent asset value across our portfolio."

These specialized loan-value estimators include firms such as Lincoln International LLC in Chicago, Valuation Resource Corp. (VRC) in New York, and an affiliate of the Duff & Phelps advisory group.

The Medallia loan totaled $1.8 billion at 6.5 percent interest. Many of the other loans in the funds are smaller and are used to finance midsized businesses, potentially spreading the risk if a few borrowers go broke, or compounding it in case of a widespread financial recession.

FS KKR, like some other private-credit funds, "should incorporate higher discount rates for stressed credits," including lower valuations for loans by companies with other outstanding loans that aren't getting paid on schedule, said Rob Dubitsky, a former Credit Suisse managing director and Moody's analyst who now heads The People's Economist, a financial-analytics startup.

"These valuation and disclosure issues are not unique" to the FS KKR fund but are reflected in private credit funds' recent weak share performance and low credit ratings from Moody's and other agencies, Dubitsky wrote in a recent article.

FS KKR was rated Baa3 by Moody's last year and BBB- by Fitch. Those are the lowest investment-grade ratings above junk bonds. Lower ratings are for entities analysts expect are more likely to default, which would discourage many investors.

While Moody's analysts and other observers expect private credit funds to continue their recent rapid growth, investors watch their opportunities closely, and may shift course.

For example, private equity has generally "underperformed" compared to public investments for most of the past five years, PSERS chief investment officer Ben Cotton told trustees at the board's annual reorganization meeting Jan. 9. So he said he's thinking it may be time to consider new private equity investments: "We are getting to where we may have opportunities and want to be ready."

rudall30 / Getty Images

GRETCHEN'S TABLE

Cauliflower 'steaks' are tender on the inside and crispy on the outside

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Like a lot of shoppers, I look for bargains when it comes to choosing which fruits and vegetables to cook each week.

Even in winter, when selections can be slim if you're not a fan of root veggies and brassicas like cabbage, broccoli and kale, I tend to buy not what looks the yummiest or most interesting, but what's on sale – or at least has a price I can live with.

When it comes to cauliflower, I won't spend more than $3 for a head of the nutritious crunchy vegetable my kids called "brains" when they were little. As adults, they love cauliflower after learning how good it tastes when slow-roasted or processed into "rice" for a gluten-free pizza crust.

This flavor-packed plant-forward recipe is another winner for brassica lovers. Instead of breaking the white head into florets or boiling and mashing it like you would potatoes, I sliced the cauliflower into thick "steaks." Then, after seasoning the slabs with salt, pepper and smoked paprika, I fried it in butter with minced garlic until it was crispy on both sides.

The steaks then went into a hot oven and were slow-roasted until they were tender enough to be pierced with a fork.

The coup de maître? After plating the cauliflower on a swoosh of lemony white bean puree, I topped it with a bright and herbaceous (and garlicky) chimichurri made with fresh parsley and cilantro.

If eating more veggies is a new year's goal, I succeeded brilliantly with this dish – and you can, too!

When choosing cauliflower, look for creamy white heads that feel heavy, with tightly packed florets. There shouldn't be any black spots on the curds – that's a sign the veggie is getting old and on a road to being tossed (though you can still eat it if you cut the spots off).

You can use any mix of fresh herbs for the chimichurri. Just be sure to add some vinegar along with the garlic and crushed red pepper to brighten the flavor.

Cauliflower 'Steaks' With White Bean Puree And Chinichurri

Serves 3-4

FOR STEAKS:
1 large cauliflower
Salt and pepper
1 tablespoon smoked paprika
2 tablespoons butter
3 garlic cloves, coarsely chopped

FOR CHIMICHURRI:
1 cup packed fresh parsley leaves, including thin stems
1 cup packed cilantro leaves, including thin stems
1 shallot, chopped
2 or 3 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed
1/2 -1 cup extra-virgin olive oil, divided
1/4 cup red wine vinegar
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes, or more to taste
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt, or more to taste

FOR BEAN PUREE:
2 (14-ounce) cans great northern or cannellini beans, rinsed and drained
Juice 1 1/2 lemons
1 large garlic clove, minced
2 tablespoons nutritional yeast
Salt and pepper, to taste

Prepare the chimichurri. In blender or food processor, combine parsley, cilantro, shallots, garlic, 1/4 cup olive oil, vinegar, oregano, black pepper, red pepper flakes and salt. Process until the ingredients are minced and combined, adding more olive oil until you reach the desired consistency. Season to taste with more salt or pepper, as desired, then transfer to a small bowl. (Sauce should be more like salad dressing than pesto.)

Prepare beans. Place beans into a blender with the juice of 1 1/2 lemons, 1 minced garlic clove, nutritional yeast and a generous pinch of salt and pepper. Blend, adding a little bit of water at a time, until you get a creamy consistency. If you like, add a little garlic powder or white miso for extra oomph.

Chop 2 or 3 thick flat steaks out of the middle of the cauliflower by slicing from the stalk up to the top. Save the florets that fall off for another recipe or add to a pan with a little salt, pepper, paprika and olive oil and stir-fry until brown and crispy to serve on top of the finished dish.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Season steaks with salt, pepper and paprika on both sides. Add butter to a large cast-iron or other oven-proof pan (mine measured 12 inches) and heat over medium-high heat.

When butter is sizzling, add cauliflower slices and garlic and allow to cook for about 5 minutes until you get a good sear on one side of the steaks. (You will want to press it down with a spatula.) Then flip and cook the other side until seared and golden brown.

Place pan in preheated oven and roast until the cauliflower is tender and deeply golden brown, about 20 minutes. (You will be able to easily pierce it with a fork.)

To serve, spoon 1/2 cup bean purée into the middle of a plate and spread it in a circle with a spatula. Place cauliflower steak on top, drizzle with chimichurri and scatter over the fried reserved cauliflower bits, if using.

Roasted cauliflower "steaks" are served with a creamy white bean puree and topped with homemade chimichurri.
Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

For Dry January, hospitality industry experts discuss why they're cutting back on alcohol

By LISA SHAMES
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — As Dry January wraps up, it's hard to ignore the sobering (pun intended) stories and stats on alcohol consumption. According to a 2025 Gallup poll, a record-low 54 percent of Americans reported that they consume alcohol. It was the third consecutive year the poll found declines in Americans' reported drinking. For the first time, a majority of Americans say drinking in moderation – one or two drinks a day – is bad for their health.

But it's not just average consumers who are questioning and changing their relationship with alcohol. Folks on the other side of the bar are too. Those in the hospitality industry are especially vulnerable to the downsides of drinking with easy access to alcohol, spirit brand-sponsored trips, alcohol-focused conferences and a social life that often revolves around bars.

With some 18 years of working in restaurants, including in her current role as bar director for Creepies and Elske, Monica Casillas-Rios knows all too well the allure of alcohol – the good and not-so-good. While she has always tried to be conscious of her drinking, taking off months here and there, she realized a few years back that she needed to rethink her frequent outings to bars, restaurants and after-hours clubs.

"I couldn't keep doing that financially and physically," Casillas-Rios says.

Six months ago, she committed to not drinking beyond the cocktail tasting research required to do her job. When she tastes wine, she always spits.

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"I realized there had been some real consistency to my drinking that I didn't love, including how early I was starting," says Vucekovich, who was one of the creative cocktail forces at influential bar the Violet Hour. More recently, he helped open Meadowlark, but his focus now is on Friends of Friends, where he is co-owner.

After abstaining from alcohol for a year, Vucekovich has been dipping his toe back in slowly, albeit with no plans to dive fully back in.

"I need to realize where my threshold is and I'm trying to be very gracious with myself with that process as it's messy," he says. "I've seen a lot of other operators and bar people who have either cut drinking out completely or cut back."

That's something Natalia Cardenas has also experienced.

"I'm hearing so many industry people share their journeys of scaling back or cutting out alcohol altogether," she says. "Honestly, that's something I had never heard before and every day I hear about more and more."

Cardenas got her start behind the bar first in Miami, followed by stints at Chicago's Purple Pig and Balena. Working in spirits was never her dream, but she fell in love with the people in the industry and the history and storytelling behind wine and spirits. The travel possibilities were a plus too.

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Casillas-Rios considers herself fortunate to have stepped into a strong NA program at Elske, including a nonalcoholic pairing menu, when she joined five years ago. She has leaned even more into those offerings at both Elske and Creepies.

"The category of nonalcoholic is growing so much that it is a disservice to not put it on your menu," she says.

In her role at Pathfinder, which includes an amaro-like NA spirit and a canned NA Negroni, Cardenas' renewed interactions with the operators and bartenders she has known for so long have revealed some interesting changes in the NA world, especially when it comes to verbiage.

"Mocktail" is out due to its child-like reference, while "nonalcoholic" has its naysayers because it sounds negative and "non-fun" says Cardenas. "Alcohol-free" has its fans. "Spirit-free" seems to be gaining popularity with industry folks, but that wouldn't necessarily apply to Pathfinder as it goes through a fermentation process with botanicals and a distillation to build flavor and dimension, so it's technically a spirit. (Confused yet? All of this doesn't even include the various terms for the different levels of alcohol consumption, ranging from "sober-curious" and "damp" to just plain "sober.")

"There are so many terrific alcohol-free options these days with different wines and spirits that operators can have more nuanced cocktails to cater to their guests," says Cardenas, especially important at a time when bars are seeing declines in patrons as their drinking habits change.

For those looking to extend their Dry January endeavor further or simply cut back, these industry experts have plenty of tips.

"People need to look within themselves and see what role alcohol plays in their life and whether it works for them," says Casillas-Rios. "Your relationship with sobriety is incredibly personal, but at the end of the day, we all want something better for ourselves."

"I wish it sounded more poetic, but just speak up," says Canchola, who also recommends finding a friend who's damp or sober.

"Have conversations with retail operators, bartenders and servers," says Cardenas. "If you're open with them, I can almost guarantee they're going to disclose that they've cut back themselves so they can give you the right direction."

"The biggest thing for me was pursuing therapy and other mindfulness things in my life that were not reliant on drinking," says Vucekovich, who admits the journey isn't without challenges. "Drinking can make you think of yourself differently, so when the beer goggles come off, it's a bit raw to sit with your feelings."

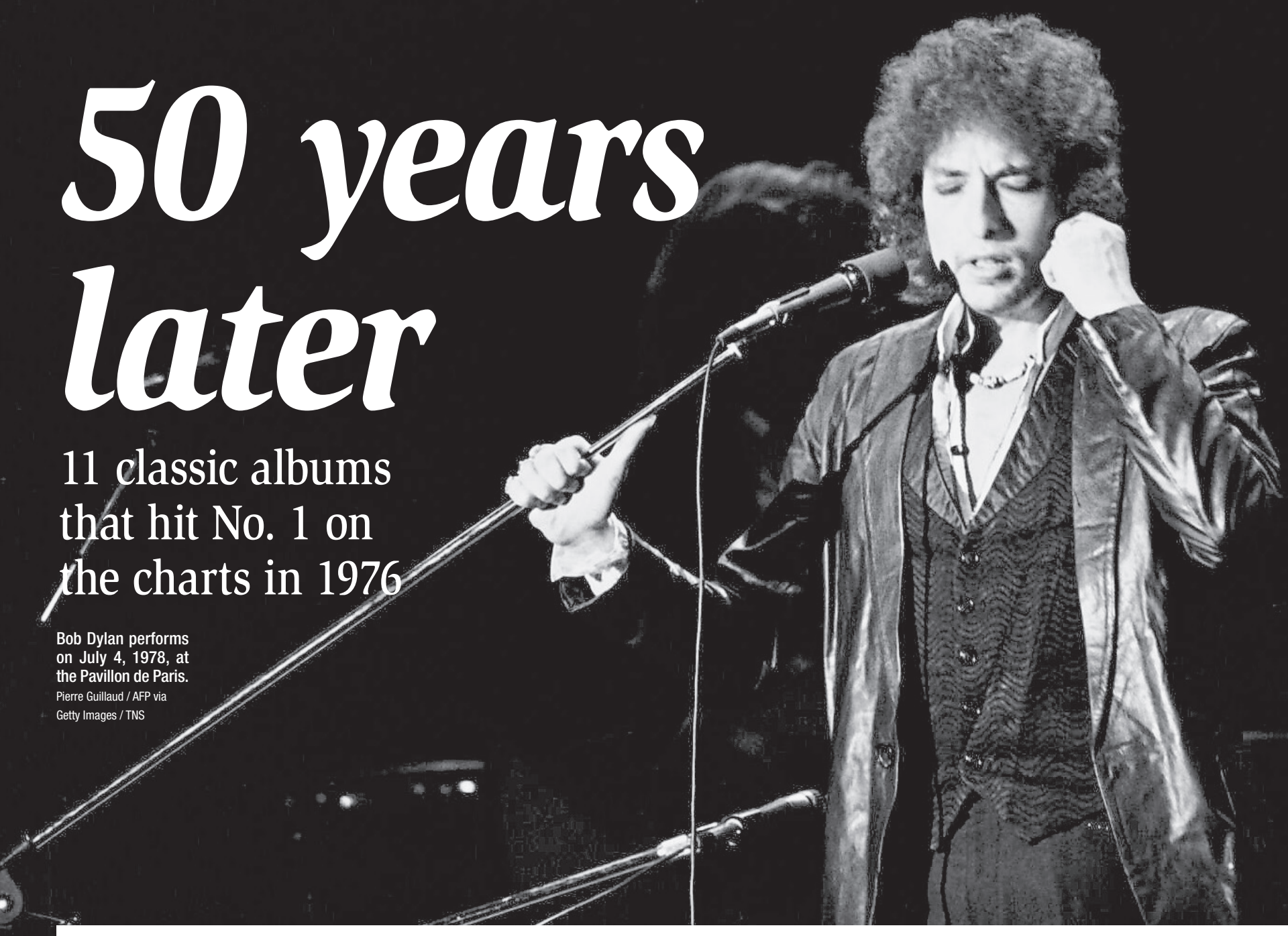
But there are plenty of benefits of not drinking too.

"I never realized how much of a morning person I was until I really stopped drinking," says Casillas-Rios. "At the end of the day, though, it's my livelihood. I still enjoy working in it, but I think a lot more of us have to take on that role of being advocates, not only for providing a good experience when it comes to people that are drinking, but also providing a good experience when people are not."

ENTERTAINMENT

50 years later

11 classic albums that hit No. 1 on the charts in 1976



Bob Dylan performs on July 4, 1978, at the Pavillon de Paris.
Pierre Guillaud / AFP via Getty Images / TNS

By PETER LARSEN
The Orange County Register (TNS)

In 1976, record shoppers knew what they liked – the Eagles and Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder and Bob Dylan – and they bought it in droves.

Only 11 different albums reached No. 1 on the Billboard 200 album chart that year, with Peter Frampton and George Benson sneaking to the top between the better-known likes of Wings, Led Zeppelin, Earth, Wind & Fire, and a few other familiar acts.

The singles chart, meanwhile, was all over the place, with radio stations in transition and not sure where to land. Wings' "Silly Love Songs" was the overall top single of '76, but Rod Stewart's "Tonight's the Night (Gonna Be Alright)" wasn't far behind.

Disco was starting to make inroads on the airwaves with No. 1 hits such as Johnny Taylor's "Disco Lady" and "Walter Murphy's "A Fifth of Beethoven." Soul and funk showed up strongly with Ohio Players' "Love Rollercoaster" and Wild Cherry's "Play That Funky Music."

And '70s soft rock was hanging around too, with Barry Manilow's "I Write the Songs," Chicago's "If You Leave Me Now," and, um, the Starland Vocal Band's "Afternoon Delight," which for some reason I can still sing from memory, also all reaching No. 1.

But we're here for the albums, and now let's get to 'em!

'Chicago IX: Chicago's Greatest Hits,' Chicago / Weeks at No. 1: 2

Chicago, which finished 1975 with three weeks at 1, held onto the top spot for two more weeks to open 1976 on the Billboard 200 album chart. This album is so stacked with hits that you can drop the needle anywhere and land on a huge hit song, from "Saturday In the Park" and "Feelin' Stronger Every Day" to "Make Me Smile" and "Wishing You Were Here." Yet somehow it didn't chart in the United Kingdom.

New and noteworthy: You know what was No. 1 on the U.K. album charts at the start of 1976? Perry Como's "40 Greatest Hits," proof that the Sex Pistols couldn't show up soon enough. Some little-known guy named Peter Frampton released an album titled "Frampton Comes Alive!" in the United States on Jan. 15. I wonder what happened with that?

'Gratitude,' Earth, Wind & Fire / Weeks at No. 1: 3

Eight months after Earth, Wind & Fire scored its first No.1 album in May 1975 with "That's the Way of the World," the soul-funk-pop band was back there with "Gratitude," a mostly live double album. There's stuff on here that's less-than-essential, but you'll feel good even listening to that. It also contained a handful of newly recorded songs, including "Sing a Song" and "Can't Hide Love."

New and noteworthy: The Thin White Duke reached record stores when David Bowie released "Station to Station" in February, an album that spun off the singles "Golden Years" and "TVC15." Diana Ross's self-titled album included the disco classic "Love Hangover," and Lynyrd Skynyrd requested that you "Gimme Back My Bullets."

'Desire,' Bob Dylan / Weeks at No. 1: 5

Dylan released his follow-up to "Blood on the Tracks" between legs of his 1975-76 Rolling Thunder Tour, recording it before heading out in '75 with many of the same musicians who'd join him on the road. The familiarity of bard and band shines through here with classic songs, such as "Hurricane," "Isis," "Mozambique," and "One More Cup of Coffee." It wraps up with "Sara," a heartfelt, unusually personal song for his soon-to-be ex-wife, Sara Dylan.

New and noteworthy: What were the Brits digging as "Desire" topped our charts? Oh dear. They'd just put "The Very Best of Slim Whitman" at No. 1 for six weeks. Phil Collins replaced Peter Gabriel as vocalist for Genesis's "A Trick of the Tail." Captain and Tennille released "Song of Joy," and finally muskrats had something to dance to at the prom. Be-Bop Deluxe released "Sunburst Finish," which you should go listen to now.

'Their Greatest Hits (1971–1975),' the Eagles / Weeks at No. 1: 5

For decades, this was the one Eagles album that almost everyone you knew had on vinyl or CD. For good reason, too, because like the Chicago compilation that opened '76 at No. 1, this Eagles ' collection had nothing but massive hits: "Take It Easy," "Desperado," "Tequila Sunrise," "Lyin' Eyes" and more. This baby is certified to have sold more than 38 million copies in the U.S. alone, making it the No. 1 selling album of the 20th century.

New and noteworthy: Kiss released "Destroyer" with singles such as "Shout It Out Loud" and "Detroit Rock City." Kiss drummer Peter Criss also let his lady know that he and the boys just couldn't find the sound, which was a lie because "Beth" became Kiss's biggest single ever. Marvin Gaye sang "I Want You," one of his sexiest songs ever, and the Doobie Brothers were "Takin' It to the Streets," with Michael McDonald on vocals for the first time. And more! Thin Lizzy dropped "Jailbreak," Rush delivered "2112," and Boz Scaggs had "Silk Degrees."

'Frampton Comes Alive!' Peter Frampton / Weeks at No. 1: 10

Here's that guy with all those lovely curls! Peter Frampton 's double live album debuted at No. 1 for a single week in April at first, but came back for another week in July, three more in August and five in September and October. Ten weeks, the top album of the whole year, powered by the singles "Show Me the Way," "Baby, I Love Your Way," and "Do You Feel Like We Do" – and that rad talk-box that had many teenage boys trying to imitate it as they drove aimlessly around their small towns looking to meet girls.

New and noteworthy: It's a little tricky because of the gaps between "Comes Alive!" at No. 1, but in its three weeks in August alone, Boston released its self-titled debut as did that city's Modern Lovers; Hall & Oates delivered "Bigger Than Both of Us," which spun off the single "Rich Girl"; and Lee "Scratch" Perry and the Upsetters' released the dub classic "Super Ape." New Zealand's Split Enz put out "Second Thoughts," produced by Phil Manzanera of Roxy Music, whose live album "Viva!" also landed.

'Wings at the Speed of Sound,' Wings / Weeks at No. 1: 7

Like Frampton, Paul McCartney's band bounced up and down to No. 1 a few times – a week in April, another in May, and five in June and July. This was a softer Wings sound than earlier albums such as "Band on the Run." The hits included "Let 'Em In," which taught us all what to do when someone's knockin' at the door, and "Silly Love Songs," which was exactly what it said on the tin. But the record was huge, and the subsequent tour, Wings Over the World, saw McCartney play live in the U.S. for the first time in a decade since the Beatles' last shows here.

New and noteworthy: Rod Stewart's "A Night on the Town" included "Tonight's the Night (Gonna Be Alright)," which got banned by the BBC for being too s-e-x-y, and his classic Cat Stevens cover, "The First Cut Is the Deepest." The title track of Maxine Nightingale's "Right Back Where We Started From" was a delightful pop hit. The Beach Boys' "15 Big Ones" is a good latter-day album. Reggae singer Peter Tosh made his debut with "Legalize It," and Graham Parker and the Rumour's "Howlin' Wind" signaled the shift of British pub rock toward new wave.

'Presence,' Led Zeppelin / Weeks at No. 1: 2

Some acts are big enough that they're always going to grab the top spot on the charts based on reputation alone. "Presence" is probably the least-known of Zeppelin's studio albums, with only "Achilles' Last Stand" and "Nobody's Fault But Mine" ever being played in live shows before the band split. Today it's seen as a return to the hard rock of Led Zeppelin's earlier days, but in 1976 it quickly sold the usual millions of copies before being overshadowed by "The Song Remains the Same" when the concert film and soundtrack arrived that fall.

New and noteworthy: Speaking of hard rock, Aerosmith released "Rocks" during "Presence's two weeks at No. 1. Soul-jazzer Roy Ayers put out "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," the title track of which would make a few hundred hip-hop samplers happy in future decades. And the Southern California all-female rock band the Runaways released their self-titled debut, giving the world its first glimpse of future solo star Joan Jett.

'Black and Blue,' the Rolling Stones / Weeks at No. 1: 4

As with Led Zeppelin and "Presence," the Stones' album this year sold a ton, wasn't praised as much at the time, but then saw its reputation grow as the years passed. The band didn't technically have a lead guitarist when they recorded it – Mick Taylor quit the band two years earlier, and though Ronnie Wood plays on some of the tracks, he wasn't officially invited to join until it was time to tour. "Fool to Cry" and "Memory Motel" are the songs you remember most.

New and notable: Warren Zevon's self-titled major-label debut didn't sell a lot, but he still made bank thanks to Linda Ronstadt's covers of "Carmelita," "Poor Poor Pitiful Me," and "Hasten Down the Wind." Billy Joel's "Turnstiles" produced a pair of his standards, "Say Goodbye to Hollywood" and "New York State of Mind." David Bowie added another terrific compilation to the year with "Changesonebowie," and the Steve Miller Band did the same in all but name with "Fly Like an Eagle," packed with great songs.

'Breezin',' George Benson / Weeks at No. 1: 2

Jazz-soul guitarist George Benson broke out of the jazz genre to score a hat trick of No. 1s on the pop, R&B and jazz charts. It's a smooth record with a pair of acclaimed and enduring hits. The single "This Masquerade," a cover of Leon Russell's song, went on to win the Grammy for record of the year in 1977, while the title track earned the Grammy for best pop instrumental performance.

New and noteworthy: New releases were a bit thin during Benson's two weeks at the top, but we did get Merle Haggard's "My Love Affair With Trains," for which Hag's only original was "No More Trains to Ride." It also included a pair of hobo songs, "The Hobo" and "Where Have All the Hoboes Gone." Remarkably, this was Merle's second train-based album, after the Jimmy Rodgers tribute "Same Train, A Different Time," which itself included a pair of hobo songs, "Hobo Meditation" and "Hobo Bill's Last Ride."

'Fleetwood Mac,' Fleetwood Mac / Weeks at No. 1: 1

Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham joined Christine McVie, John McVie and Mick Fleetwood for this album, and suddenly Fleetwood Mac rocketed toward the stardom it would carry into commercial and critical acclaim in the decades that followed. But it took time! The album was released in July 1975, and it wasn't until the singles "Over My Head, "Rhiannon," and "Say You Love Me" had been all over the radio that the album hit No. 1 for a week in September 1976.

New and noteworthy: Bob Dylan, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Rush all released live albums, "Hard Rain," "One More From the Road," and "All the World's a Stage," respectively. Funkadelic released "Tales of Kidd Funkenstein," which opened with a track titled "Butt-to-Butresuscitation" and closed out side 1 with "Take Your Dead A-- Home!" Joan Armatrading and Tom Waits released two different takes on singer-songwriter albums, with hers self-titled and his titled "Small Change."

'Songs in the Key of Life,' Stevie Wonder / Weeks at No. 1 / 11

Stevie's masterpiece of masterpieces closed out 1976 with 11 consecutive weeks at No. 1. A double album with a bonus 4-track EP, "Songs" is stuffed with fantastic tunes from "Sir Duke," "I Wish" and "Pastime Paradise" to "As," "Another Star" and "Isn't She Lovely?" Seeing him perform it in full at the Forum in 2014 was a bucket list moment. That it arrived in 1976 after a run of albums that began in 1972 with "Music of My Mind," "Talking Book," "Innervisions," and "Fulfillingness' First Finale" says everything you need to know about the genius of Stevie Wonder in his prime.

New and noteworthy: ABBA's "Arrival" landed with hits including "Dancing Queen," "Money, Money, Money," and "Knowing Me, Knowing You." Elton John and Bob Seger released "Blue Moves" and "Night Moves" on the same day in October, yet somehow we didn't get the Blue Night Moves tour from the two of them. The Patti Smith Group released "Radio Ethiopia," Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers dropped their self-titled debut, the Eagles checked us all into the "Hotel California," Queen took us to "A Day at the Races," and just before the end of the year, Blondie made its self-titled debut, too.

MOVIE REVIEW

Brook Rushton / 20th Century Studios / TNS

Rachal McAdams in the movie "Send Help."

Rachel McAdams, Dylan O'Brien shine in Sam Raimi's gonzo blast *'Send Help'*

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

The poster for "Send Help" advertises the film as, "from the director of 'The Evil Dead' and 'Drag Me to Hell'" – notably not "Spider-Man" (or its two sequels). No, the kind of Sam Raimi film you're getting here is irreverent, silly and very bloody; a character study that also features incredibly goofy scares. Written by Damian Shannon and Mark Swift, "Send Help" is a gonzo survivalist riff that works as well as it does because it features two incredibly game actors that surf the wave of Raimi's tonal madness with a blend of absolute glee and carefully honed skill.

If the poster were to present the star of "Send Help," in the same way as Raimi, the tagline would read, "from the star of 'Red Eye' and 'Mean Girls,'" because Rachel McAdams is fully in her horror/comedy mode here, and it's an excellent reminder of her range. Co-star Dylan O'Brien also proves himself once again to be one of the best actors of his generation: a teen heartthrob who now operates more like a chameleonic character actor. Both McAdams and O'Brien play with their movie star personae but move beyond those expectations to deliver highly expressive, almost clownish performances – in the best way.

McAdams is astonishingly dowdy as beleaguered corporate workhorse Linda Liddle, a "Survivor"-obsessed loser who is passed over for a promotion by her slick new nepo baby boss, Bradley Preston (Dylan O'Brien). In an attempt to play the good ol' boys game, she boards a private flight to Bangkok with the team where she bangs out memos while they laugh at her "Survivor" audition tape. One plane crash and stranding on a tropical island later, the tables are turned, with the injured Bradley now at the mercy of Linda and her survival skills.

'Film Title'

★★★

MPA rating: R (for strong/bloody violence and language)

Running time: 1:53

How to watch: In theaters

The swap in power dynamic thrills Linda, and the shift calls to mind Ruben Östlund's "Triangle of Sadness," specifically the relationship between Dolly de Leon and Harris Dickinson. But "Send Help" is more of of a psychological exploration than overt class satire, though it incorporates all relevant social status markers and constructs as it explores the ridiculous notion of what it would be like to be stranded on an island with your boss.

McAdams and O'Brien deliver almost silent-film era acting with their faces (there's one bravura long shot of O'Brien eating a bug that's absolutely virtuosic), and Raimi's camera playfully pushes the audience around, offering exaggerated tilts and close-ups on specific items, saying "look here, at that!" There's no subtlety, but would you expect that from the director of "The Evil Dead" and "Drag Me to Hell"? You're just waiting for the ghouls and blood geysers to pop out. That level of cheeky artifice extends to the aesthetic of their paradisiacal island adventure too, but we don't come to a Raimi film for its natural realism.

If there's any flaw to "Send Help," it's that it generates such nuance and empathy for both Linda and Bradley, even within such outlandish circumstances and style, that it feels impossible to root for just one of them to come out on top. The film paints itself into such a corner when it comes to their conflict that any ending would feel too clean, too pat. As it stands, the ending is just that. It's to the script's credit – as well as Raimi and the actors – that they manage to make such an odious character as Bradley actually sympathetic, and such a clear heroine as Linda so complex and thorny. Nothing's perfect, but "Send Help" is a blast nevertheless.

MOVIE REVIEW

'Clika' can't find the cinematic beat

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

The title of Michael Greene's coming-of-age music film "Clika" refers to the slang word for "clique" in the terminology of the corridos tumbados musical genre, or trap corridos, a distinctly American evolution of the Mexican storytelling ballads. This blending of musical cultures takes the narrative quality of traditional corridos and incorporates rap and hip-hop styling, as well as uniquely modern Mexican American stories, as pioneered in large part by groups like Herencia de Patrones, a band out of Yuba City, California. Frontman JayDee makes his acting debut in "Clika," a film based in part on his own life story.

The film's producer is musica Mexicana record exec Jimmy Humilde, CEO of Rancho Humilde, and his intent with the project is to prove Mexican American stories worthy of the big-screen treatment. It's a noble endeavor, and an important one in this moment, in which Latino Americans are being unfairly targeted by the administration. If Humilde and Greene get anything right with "Clika," it's asserting the importance of these stories in film, as Latino representation in cinema is often woefully lacking.

It also introduces JayDee and his music to a wider and more mainstream audience. With a unique vocal styling and sound that is all his own, he will be a true discovery for some viewers, and an exciting screen debut for his already established fans.

'Clika'

★

MPA rating: R (for drug content, language throughout, and sexual material)

Running time: 1:22

How to watch: In theaters

That's the good news about "Clika." The bad news is that they probably should have made a documentary or a concert film to tell JayDee's story instead. Toward the end of "Clika" we get a few clips of real concert footage, as JayDee's character Chito finally finds the musical success he's dreamed of, and it's so much more compelling than the hackneyed gangster tale they've reverse-engineered into JayDee's life story.

The problems with "Clika" fundamentally come down to script issues. Written by Greene, Humilde and Sean Sullivan McBride (cinematographer and producer Ski-ter Jones also has a "story by" credit), the film is a grab bag of clichés we've seen before, with an overreliance on dialogue and voice-over narration that exposes the inexperienced actors. The film tells without showing, the emotional stakes aren't legible, and the characters tell the audience what to think and how to feel without setting up the foundation or allowing us to get there ourselves. Some plot points make very little sense.

Courtesy of Sony Pictures

Jay Dee as Chito in the movie "Clika."

It's a standard hardscrabble coming-of-age story – kid from a small town with big dreams wants to escape a life of farm work (JayDee did pick peaches in Yuba City like Chito does) and pursue his goals. When his Tio Alfredo (Cristian E. Gutierrez) learns Chito's mom (Nana Ponceleon) has fallen behind on the mortgage, he enlists his nephew for interstate marijuana deliveries to make the money to pay off the bank, and the young man gets too caught up in the fast life, rising to a point that will always include a fall. The message that he ultimately takes away is that there are no shortcuts to success.

The script is filled with tired tropes and doesn't set up JayDee in a way that showcases his natural presence or way with words. Comedian and podcaster DoKnow, who plays his friend and producer Blunt, is the only performer whose natural ease and charisma in front of the camera translates, and he's only given fairly corny and dated material, like ogling a sexy fellow peach-picker (Paola Villalobos) who is presented with her hair blowing in slow-mo like it's an '80s college sex comedy, and not a gritty rags to riches tale.

There is a way that this could have been done better, utilizing visual storytelling, establishing atmosphere and a sense of place that could have given a sense of the music, its large appeal and the circumstances that shaped it, while also allowing JayDee to shine in his own way. As it stands, he seems out of his depth here.

Corridos are about storytelling, and the innovation of trap corridos is incorporating new stories and sounds into traditional music. It's a shame that "Clika" then feels so stale, cinematically, not matching the skill or style of its subject. Representationally, "Clika" is an important and worthy film. Cinematically, it unfortunately can't find the beat.

Live storytelling

Standing at a microphone telling a story can be a personal kind of theater

By NINA METZ
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune / TNS

Storyteller Antonio Pizarro performs at a Moth StorySLAM at The Den Theatre Monday on Jan. 12 in Chicago.

CHICAGO — A night at the theater tends to mean seeing a play. But something far more low-key and informal – a person standing at a microphone at a bar or restaurant and telling a personal story – is a form of theater, as well, and it has a strong foothold locally.

Several storytelling events take place across the Chicago area each month, where the barrier to entry is significantly lower than that of traditional theater, for both audience (you can get up to use the restroom without risking dirty looks) and storytellers (who run the gamut in terms of performing experience). Some events include a cover charge; others are free. Some assemble the lineup of performers ahead of time, others are open mics.

One quality uniting them all: A focus on personal storytelling.

"We use the term 'real' rather than 'true' stories, because we're not journalists, so we're not fact-checking somebody's story," says Amanda Delheimer, the artistic director of 2nd Story. "The litmus test we use is that an audience member can walk up to the storyteller afterwards and say, 'Oh, that happened to me, too,' with the understanding that the storyteller isn't going to then say, 'I made it up. That was fiction.'

"We believe that people sharing their experiences with each other is the thing that ties us to each other and connects us to each other as human beings. So we're trying to create a space where that can happen."

At 2nd Story's upcoming show on Jan. 25, Delheimer says one story is about "a young woman coming to terms with her complete misunderstanding of how the IRS works and the consequences thereof. Another is a beautiful ode set during the early days of the pandemic; the first line of her story is, 'I didn't touch another human being between March of 2020 and April of 2021.' And the third one is about this guy who is in his first year of teaching and just completely gets his a-- handed to him. He's 21, teaching 17-year-olds, so it's about how he learns to be himself in the midst of this absolute mayhem."

Storytellers come from a variety of professions, including doctors and computer scientists, but it seems to draw an unusually high number of school teachers, including Scott Woldman, who will be performing in Highland Park as part of Short Story Theatre's next performance on Jan. 22. He has been telling stories on stage for two decades. "I'm a middle school teacher and I was an improviser a long time ago," he says. His upcoming story concerns a subculture that feels alien to him:

"My daughter is a travel softball player – an elite athlete who is going through the whole college recruitment thing – whereas I am not really an athlete, or ever expected to be related to an athlete. So I'm going to be talking about how I don't fit in with the other parents. I'm not a jock, but they don't really want to talk about anything other than softball. Both my wife and daughter are constantly worried that I'm going to do something to embarrass them. So I'll be sharing that slice-of-life."

Short Story Theatre was created by Donna Lubow, who was inspired by the work of 2nd Story. "I said, oh my gosh, this is so much fun, why don't we do it in the suburbs? Because nothing at that time had been done in the suburbs."

It's a relatively simple start-up process. No set or costume designer is needed. You don't need to license the rights to a play. "All you need is a microphone and some lights," says Lubow. "And a music stand for people who don't have their stories memorized." She initially drew from her own circle – "even my dentist wound up telling a story and he became a standup comedian because of it."

Some storytelling events are curated. Others are more of a free-for-all, including The Moth StorySLAM, which is competitive. Friendly. But it's set up as a competition. Here's how it works:

Before each show, "I scan the room to find three judging teams," says regional producer Esteban Alarcon. "This involves me approaching a group of attendees, asking if they've been to a Moth event before, and if they're signed up or planning to sign up to tell a story. These are our prerequisite questions, since a 'yes' to any of them means they cannot be judges. The judging teams give each storyteller a score and the storyteller with the best average score wins and gets a certificate (signed by yours truly and that night's host) and they get an invitation to perform at the Moth GrandSLAM."

Are any topics off-limits?

"Pretty much nothing is out of bounds," says Woldman, "but I don't really talk about my job or my students. And as I've gotten older, I try to not share things that might embarrass or upset someone in the story. That hasn't always been the case; sometimes my approach has been, if you don't want to be in my story, then act better!"

Scott Whitehair produces a number of storytelling events in town including StoryLab, This Much is True, Story Vroom Vroom and Do Not Submit, the latter of which takes place in multiple locations through the city each month: "It's an open mic that is free from judgment, pressure, critique or scoring. We call ourselves obnoxiously enthusiastic," he says.

"We decided to spread it around geographically because sometimes when there's an event on the other side of town, it can be tough to get there. And we found that when we started to create these different nights, we also got people coming from right in the neighborhood. People who might go to a pizza place for an open mic aren't necessarily the same people who would go to the Hopleaf to have some beers, so it's a variety of atmospheres and a variety of locations that create a lot of different opportunities for people to come out."

What makes a story performable?

"I don't believe in bad stories or bad storytellers," Whitehair says. "We all have things we're working through. I tell people, if you get up and share something that you want people to know about your experience, that can only come from you, you've done it correctly. We want you to be a part of it. If you're a human being, you can do this.

"Of course, there are people who have been around storytelling in Chicago who have really polished their stories and get a lot of opportunities, and that's exciting and it's fun to see them. But you also have people who come to these nights and they've never done anything like this before, they don't have a performance or even a writing background, and they want to share their stories with people – maybe they came for a sandwich and a beer, their friend brought them along, and they think, yeah, I got something I want to say – and they're as celebrated and accepted every bit as much as someone who is a longtime storyteller."

2nd Story takes a different approach. "We have a multi-month process that shepherds people through crafting their experience into a narrative to share with others," says Delheimer. "Some of it is realizing that your audience can't pause or rewind. They can't turn the page back and reread the sentence. So how are you going to craft the story so that somebody that's listening to it for the first time can follow along? How are you going to bring the audience along?

"One way to animate a story is to ensure it includes characters, in a setting, engaging in action or dialogue. And how much you slow that action down or speed it up can help create a film or television show inside somebody's mind – that they can imagine this story as I tell it to them."

Also, the willingness to share something that has remained hidden up to this point, or makes you feel uncomfortable. "You don't always have to be the hero of your story," is how Delheimer explains it. "The best stories are vulnerable to tell but also to hear – that as an audience member, you really feel like we are doing this tender thing together."

According to Lubow, a story needs a moral or a universal theme. "Something that people can relate to. And it should be something fresh and new, with a little twist maybe. Constructing any type of story, you want to construct a solid beginning, middle and end – people need to know when your story is over. But we're looking for a variety of things. We're looking for stories that can make people laugh. Sometimes we get stories that are very sad and you cry when the storytellers themselves start crying, which can be so touching. And usually we ask that there's a bit of dialogue in the story, because it just makes it come alive more."

What about artificial intelligence?

In a moment when some have no qualms using generative AI to compose everything from eulogies to wedding speeches, it seems inevitable that this would affect the storytelling world, but that doesn't seem to be the case yet, according to event producers.

"I guess we'll see how it plays out," Whitehair says, "but I don't know that it would be very fulfilling for that person or how much they'd enjoy it." This is a sentiment echoed by his fellow storytelling producers.

"That feeling of sharing something, in your voice, from you – there's no replacement for that," he says. "And I would imagine if folks want to use AI, they will feel that magic is lacking. Because if the end goal is 'I want to get a great story,' well maybe a computer can write a great story, but it's not your story, even if it's based on your experience. So I'm hoping if there is more of a reliance on AI, people quickly realize, oh, this sucks. I'm not too concerned about that as a producer of events."

The intimacy and immediacy of being in person

This comes up often. As Whitehair puts it: "It's a person talking to you. There's no fourth wall – we're never pretending the audience isn't there. It's a slightly more formal version of something we do on street corners and train platforms and bars."

And while The Moth is unique in that it is also a podcast, the draw of a live event is that it only happens one time.

"I see the value of podcasts, but I haven't personally delved into that because I love that these stories live in this moment and that's it," Whitehair says. "Even if you hear that story 30 more times at different venues at different times, it's never the same because it's never the same group of people, it's never the same conversation, it's never the same reactions. Stories I first did 10 years ago are very different now because I've changed as a person, but also this world is very different, so the context might feel different. And the listeners bring themselves to it, so you don't know what someone is going to find especially funny, or hit them right where they live because they just went through something like it. That connection is different every single time. And that's what keeps people coming back as listeners and as tellers. So whatever it is in that moment is what it is, and I think that comes across: This is special. This is happening right now and will not happen this way again."

Our commonalities and our differences

A consistent throughline mentioned by all the producers is the feeling of connection that often exists between the storytellers and audiences who relate to their experiences.

But sometimes it can be just as compelling to hear a story and think: I would never make those choices. I would never want to live that life. It's healthy to be presented with someone else's experience and a viewpoint that is different from your own. A person standing in front of you telling you about their life is a fundamentally humanizing act, rather than what tends to transpire on social media.

"We have our shared humanity," Whitehair says, "but we can also go 'Oh, wow, that's very different than what I would do in that situation,' and you're seeing them as a human who is making a decision and it doesn't feel so alien to contemplate that. There isn't necessarily a judgment attached to that."

Here is a roundup of some of the regular storytelling events in the Chicago area:

SHORT STORY THEATRE: A storytelling event in Highland Park featuring real stories from people's lives. There is no regular schedule, events happen periodically. Next show is Jan 22 centering around the theme of "family tales unplugged" at The Art Center Highland Park, 1957 Sheridan Road.; shortstorytheatre.com

2ND STORY: A curated monthly storytelling event (rather than an open mic) with a straightforward but meaningful mission: "We want to live in a world driven by empathy. We believe that stories are what bind us to each other. Therefore, we create spaces where people can share and deeply listen to one another's stories." Next show is Jan. 25 at Haymarket Pub & Brewery, 737 W. Randolph St.; 2ndstory.com

THE MOTH STORYSLAM: An open-mic storytelling competition focusing on true, personal stories about that night's theme, lasting no longer than five minutes. Open to all. The next show is Jan. 20 at FitzGerald's and the theme is "tightrope": "Prepare a five-minute story about big risks, sneaky sidesteps, and treading lightly. The time you found yourself in territory so treacherous that one wrong move might crack the whole surface. Flirting with catastrophe, the texts you shouldn't have sent, the secret you let slip, the gamble that cost you everything. Did you narrowly miss disaster, or did you plunge right through?" Twice monthly, alternating between The Den Theatre in Wicker Park, 1331 N. Milwaukee Ave., and FitzGerald's in Berwyn, 6615 W. Roosevelt Road, themoth.org/events

DO NOT SUBMIT: A series of free open mics that take place monthly across the city, wherein "people from all walks of life and backgrounds can come together each month to connect through the sharing of personal stories in a safe, supportive environment free from pressure, judgment, or scoring. No experience necessary." Venue and date varies depending on location, which includes spots in Andersonville, Berwyn, Bridgeport, Edgewater, Glenview, Lake Forest, Lakeview, Libertyville, Lincoln Square, North Center and Printer's Row; donotsubmitchicago.com

STORY LAB CHICAGO: A monthly event featuring people "from every walk of life and experience level to share their true personal stories with packed houses of attentive listeners. Each show is an unpredictable mix of the hilarious and the heartbreaking, featuring memorable tales from your friends, neighbors and fellow Chicagoans." Third Thursday of every month at Mrs. Murphy & Sons Irish Bistro, 3905 N. Lincoln Ave.; storylabchicago.com

THIS MUCH IS TRUE: A curated monthly storytelling event featuring true, personal stories from a new group of people each time, from the "heartbreaking to the hilarious and everything in between." Past storytellers have included chefs, theologians and "Saturday Night Live" alums. Second Thursday of every month at Mrs. Murphy & Sons Irish Bistro, 3905 N. Lincoln Ave.; thismuchistruechicago.com

MONDAY NIGHT OPEN MIC: An open mic hosted by the Chicago Public Library, where people are invited to "share a work of your own creation" or simply attend as an audience member. Last Monday of the month at the Chicago Public Library's Rogers Park location (6907 N. Clark St.); chipublib.bibliocommons.com

Michael J. Fox was so moved by *'Shrinking,'* he asked his former 'Spin City' boss for a part

By YVONNE VILLARREAL
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Robert Voets / Apple TV / TNS

Michael J. Fox in Season 3 of "Shrinking." Fox guest stars as Gerry, a fellow patient with Parkinson's disease.

Robert Voets / Apple TV / TNS

Jason Segel, left, and Harrison Ford in "Shrinking," now streaming on Apple TV.

LOS ANGELES — The call from Michael J. Fox didn't need any punching up. It arrived after he began watching "Shrinking," the Apple TV comedy co-created by his former "Spin City" boss Bill Lawrence that features Harrison Ford as a therapist adjusting to life with Parkinson's. The actor, who was diagnosed with the disease at 29, was moved by the depth and nuances he felt in the writing and performance.

"It's so human and it was accessible for me," he recalls thinking. "I know what that is." And, so, he called Lawrence roughly a year ago, once he burned through episodes, to say as much. But this being Fox, he slapped it with the sort of wry delivery that long ago made him a master of comedic timing.

"Bill, why the f--- am I not on the show?"

Immediately launching into laughter, Lawrence pipes in: "It's true."

The pair are recounting the moment during a recent video call – Fox beaming in from his home in New York; Lawrence from his office on the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank – to promote the guest role for Fox that spun from that conversation.

In Season 3, which premiered Wednesday with two episodes, Ford's character, Paul, after noticing a progression of his Parkinson's symptoms, schedules a doctor's visit. While waiting to be seen, he encounters Gerry (Fox), a fellow patient with Parkinson's who, like Fox, hasn't lost his humor. (The series has been renewed for a fourth season.) It reunites Fox and Lawrence, who first worked together on "Spin City" through the show's fourth season, after which Fox departed to manage his health. The pair last worked together in 2004 when the actor guest starred on Lawrence's medical comedy "Scrubs." Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Q: You get the call from Michael that sets this in motion. But had it been in your mind, Bill, having Michael stroll through "Shrinking" at some point?

LAWRENCE: I'm a sucker because every time Mike retires from acting, I believe him. [laughs] I hate to get deep on you, but I referenced Mike a bunch because one of the things when you do what I do, you always hope, especially when you're a fan, that people turn out to be the way you imagine them in your head. With Mike, I got spoiled young, and he turned out to be the person I wished he would be. As every guy in his late 50s who waxes poetic about the way things used to be, any time I get the opportunity to do that again, I'm going to take it.

Q: To Bill's point, Michael, in 2020 you announced your most recent retirement from acting in your book, "No Time Like the Future," saying that your symptoms were making it difficult to be on set or memorize lines at the time. How was it to arrive at that decision?

FOX: It was non-emotional and kind of OK. I was doing ... "The Good Fight" – I confused it with Kiefer [Sutherland's] show ["Designated Survivor"] because both shows, I had similar issues. They're both very legal. I'd have to read screeds of legalese. I couldn't get it. When I did "The Good Fight," I had just seen one of my favorite movies, "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood," and there was a great scene where Leo [DiCaprio] goes back in his room and just lays into himself in the mirror and just goes insane and drinking and crying at his lack of ability to memorize lines and I found myself, similarly, in front of a mirror and I went: Meh!

[A collective laugh erupts]

"I can't do it. I can't do this anymore." So, let's just get this puppy done as best I can and ... move on with my life. So that's what I did. I flashed back to back in the early aughts when you were doing "Scrubs" and you called me up and asked me if I would do something. I thought, "Well, I retired." I had retired from "Spin City" and I didn't really want to do anything, and I did the show and I loved it and [had] all these great offers for things – I discovered this new niche, which is do characters that had some kind of flaw and taking my Parksinsonian issues and translate that into cancer on "Boston Legal" and a form of Parkinsonism on "The Good Wife." But I saw Billy's show, and I just thought, it's fantastic. The depth of character, the quality of relationships, the language – it's just a beautiful show. And I thought, just do that for its own sake. I don't have an agenda. Don't have to be coming back into acting or anything. It'll be fun. And there's Harrison Ford, which is insane.

Q: How did you arrive at the Gerry character, Bill, and using him as a figure to illustrate the progression of Paul's symptoms.

LAWRENCE: The show is set up that Mike could have said, "I want to come on as a cameo and I can play Mike Fox" because it's a doctor in L.A. But the first thing he said was, "I want to play a character," which is so much cooler for a writing team.

Brett Goldstein, who created the show with me, his father has Parkinson's. My grandfather had Parkinson's. My dad has Lewy bodies with Parkinson's. And Mike has been a force in my life for a long time. [Two] things that always plagued us in the show: One, is authenticity; the second one is, just because of our own experience, wanting to have a hopefulness and not have something feel maudlin and have it feel inspiring. Nobody in my family has ever – and Mike is another great, inspirational example – treated Parkinson's like a death sentence or like something that you need to walk around in the shadows the whole time. We never knew we'd be able to kind of elevate the show to the level we did; once you put Mike on it, it has kind of a new level of authenticity.

Q: What was it like being on that set? Much of your screen time, Michael, is with Harrison, so give me your best Harrison story.

FOX: The thing with Harrison is he just was so lovely. I didn't know what to expect, we certainly have a lot of mutual friends and acquaintances and people who we work with, Bob Z. [Zemeckis] and Steven Spielberg. I wasn't nervous, but I knew he'd be cool. But I didn't know he'd be as cool as he was and sweet to me. You saw this, Bill, he was tender.

LAWRENCE: He was moved by the whole thing, man.

FOX: Then we started to act. He found something in the character, and in my character, and he just launched into it. I was like, "No wonder this guy's one of the biggest stars in the world."

Q: The encounter between Paul and Gerry results in the slogan that carries through the season, "F--- Parkinson's." Michael, did you arrive at an empowering slogan like that to fuel your own journey?

FOX: I have a million. I drive my kids crazy with my lessons. I like to say: Let's deal with what is. It might be what was, what could be. Parkinson's will really mess with you; it screws with your memory, so you can't remember how screwed up you are. ... It's all about stepping in the light and figuring out what's next on the agenda. I'm much more worried about Canada and Greenland than I am about Parkinson's. I get a lot of confidence and positivity and sense of purpose from feeling part of this community.

This whole thing, some might say, truncated my career; maybe in one aspect, but it made it more dynamic in other aspects and more laden with possibility. At the core of it, I'm still just an actor. I'm the happiest sitting on a set with Harrison Ford, making people laugh.

Q: When you look back at the decision to leave "Spin City," what was your outlook – your mindset about your future and mortality – then versus now? We see how Paul decides he'd rather, as he puts it, "suck the marrow of what's left of this amazing life" than wallow.

FOX: I was thinking about my kids. My kids are 24, two 30s (twins), and 37 – so they're done. They're cooked. I don't have to worry about them anymore. When I went into retirement, I wanted time with them. I spent that time with them and they grew up, and I was with them all those years. Now I'm 64 years old, my wife and I have an empty nest, so I'm happy to dip my toe back in more. But it's not the beginning of any campaign to reestablish my career.

LAWRENCE: Having been there, I was always blown away, when somebody announces their retirement, you expect them to shuffle off into the ether. Mike was almost immediately as busy as he had ever been.

FOX: I had the foundation stuff to do. If I hadn't been busy with it, it would have been really difficult. [In 2000, he founded the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, aimed at finding treatments and a cure for the disease.]

LAWRENCE: I hadn't been for a while, [but] I went to one of the foundation's events and the culture is pervasively hopeful and optimistic. And getting to be around these people that are day-to-day involved with all this stuff, and some living with it, is so inspiring and made me feel like we were all on the right path as far as you tell stories about this.

Q: To expand on the community aspect of this, Michael's character returns later in the season and connects with Paul about their experiences. Why was that important to show?

LAWRENCE: Mike already made the point here, just randomly on this interview – it doesn't matter if you empathize and you're around it. I don't know what it's like to live with Parkinson's. The only person that really gets it is somebody else that lives with it. For a character in a show to have a community of somebody else dealing with the exact same things, it becomes a two-way street. It was such a good thing for us writing-wise. We even made a joke about it. There's another character in one of the scenes that those guys did that feels out of place because all he's got is prostate cancer. I think he says, "I have mostly issues with peeing." And Mike riffs, "I have issues with peeing." On a storytelling level, to have a peer group that actually is going through what you've gone through – on an authenticity level, I would have never done the story because Harrison was already very nervous about playing somebody with a condition, so then to go, "You're gonna get with this other person who's also faking it," I don't think it would have sat well.

FOX: He's so exquisite. The way he plays it is so beautiful. It's so subtle.

LAWRENCE: He [Ford] makes our medical advisers send him videos. He studies. He's really obsessed about it. He looks at takes afterwards to see if he's moving correctly. The guy's a gift on this stuff.

Q: Part of Paul's journey is grappling with what his identity is if he's not doing the work that he loves. How does your work as an actor keep you feeling like yourself, or give you a sense of purpose? But also, who is the Michael you've come to discover outside of that?

FOX: You find another version of yourself that you weren't looking for, one you wouldn't know to go looking for. It just lands in your doorstep and you either try to get around or you go through it. I just try to go through it. I'm not the biggest mystery in the world. There's a lot that I learned from the struggles. I won't lie to you, some of the times that were really frustrating – I don't fall too much anymore; I fell a lot for a while. I'm not doing that anymore. But sometimes I'll slide down a wall and get to a place on the floor and I can't get up and I think about that lady in that television commercial – "I've fallen and I can't get up." It's a real thing, you can't get up. I'll wait for somebody to stroll by, if I'm in my house. That can be a tragic thing, but that just is what it is. In terms of this part, when I need to access that stuff, I haven't blocked it. I haven't been in denial about it. I haven't lied to myself about it. I can give Bill something that people don't understand and progress the story and maybe enlighten people.

Q: This season we see how Paul struggles with his legacy, what it means and who will carry it on. Michael, is that something you give a lot of thought to?

FOX: I'll be dead. ... My late father-in-law wrote a book once called "Die Broke." The theory being spend all your money now. I don't mean just money. Your gift, your nectar. Spend it all now, and spend it on your kids, on people you love. I don't think about legacy. Certainly, the foundation will be around and our work will continue. It'd be nice to have it done before I die, but I don't know if that will happen. We're certainly getting closer. Legacy is other people's business; my business is to live my best life, do the best I can, the best work I can, seize opportunities like working with Billy and Harrison and continue to write my story until the pin drops.

Q&A

Michael J. Fox
Bill Lawrence

Sam Raimi dedicates 'Send Help' to his childhood friend, Scott Spiegel

By ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News (TNS)

Valerie Macon / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

Director Sam Raimi attends the world premiere of "Send Help" at the TCL Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles on Jan. 21.

DETROIT — Stay through the end credits of director Sam Raimi's wild new horror thriller "Send Help," starring Rachel McAdams and Dylan O'Brien as warring co-workers stranded on a deserted island together following a horrific plane crash, and you'll see a dedication: "In memory of Scott Spiegel."

Spiegel was childhood friends with Raimi and his ragtag crew of young filmmaking friends – along with Bruce Campbell – who were making "Three Stooges"-inspired slapstick comedies as junior high and high school kids in Birmingham and Royal Oak in the 1970s. Raimi and Campbell were both into movies and movie culture, but Spiegel was on a whole 'nother level with his fandom, and his technical prowess.

All of them went on to Hollywood careers: Raimi turned into one of the industry's top directors, kicking off the modern superhero motherlode with his "Spider-Man" trilogy, and Campbell became a campy cult hero, thanks to his roles in Raimi's "Evil Dead" films.

Spiegel wasn't as well known to the masses, but he made a considerable mark on the movie business in his own right: He was a writer, director and a guy who knew everybody, and after he introduced his producing partner Lawrence Bender to a young Quentin Tarantino, Tarantino publicly thanked Spiegel for giving him a career.

Spiegel died of a heart attack in September, as "Send Help" was in postproduction, and Raimi decided to honor his friend's memory by dedicating the film in his name.

"We spent years learning from Scott," says Raimi, on a Zoom call last week from his home in Los Angeles. "Scott showed us the way."

Without Spiegel showing Raimi and his friends the way in those early years when they were all young, creatively fertile movie obsessives, Hollywood might look very different than it does today.

A critical component

Raimi was born and raised in Royal Oak, and he attended Wylie E. Groves High School in Birmingham, where he met Campbell as a youngster.

Campbell already knew Spiegel, and he brought him into the friend group. "Scott and I went all the way back," says Campbell, on the phone earlier this week. "There's nobody, not one guy, I've known longer than Scott Spiegel in my whole existence."

Campbell and Spiegel worked together at Walnut Lake Market, on Walnut Lake Road in West Bloomfield Township, where they were both stock boys, breaking down cardboard boxes behind the store for hours on end. While they were handling the boxes, they'd dream about making movies.

Every inch of Spiegel's "lair," as Campbell calls Spiegel's quarters in his mother's cottage on Walnut Lake, was lined with monster masks, horror magazines, model kits.

Campbell introduced Spiegel to Raimi, and Raimi was shocked to learn Spiegel, who was a year older than him, was as into the craft of filmmaking as he and his friends were.

In the basement of Spiegel's house, he had set up a movie screen, with a couch in front of the screen. He had built a fake wall with a projector set up behind it, which he would use to project movies. It wasn't gigantic but it was an impressive set up, especially for the time, and it showed how serious he was about movies.

"I couldn't believe that he'd gone to these lengths," says Raimi, now 66.

In addition to showing movies, Spiegel also made them, and was several steps ahead of Raimi and his friends.

"Bruce had done great experiments with stop motion. He would put some stuff on the ground, pretending to be on a car, and take a frame, scoot it forward, take another frame, scoot forward, and it was amazing looking. You know, incredible stuff," Raimi says. "But Scott made movies with stories and sets. I couldn't believe it."

"Scott was key, Scott was critical," says Campbell, 67. "Scott was the one who took it more seriously than we did way back when."

Spiegel's shorts – he made "Inspector Klutz Saves the Day" when he was 12, "Pies and Guys" and "Corny Casanovas" both when he was 14 – not only had sets and stories, but they included extra touches, like stock footage.

"He would make his movies in black-and-white so he could get this expensive-looking stock footage that he could buy from, like, Blackhawk Films, and cut it into his movies to make it look really professional," Campbell says.

Spiegel's films also had soundtracks. He would record "Three Stooges" shorts and then perform to the audio, which he would play back on set on a cassette player, and then sync the sound in the final edit. And his movies had credits attached, and he taught Raimi how to make credits using stencils, and how to light the background so they'd read correctly on camera.

"And that's how we made movies for many years," Raimi says.

A sense of showmanship

Along with their pals Josh Becker, Mike Ditz, John Cameron and Bill Kirk, Raimi and friends would make slapstick shorts, getting a little bit better with each subsequent title. They would take turns shooting, lighting, and acting; Campbell was "the only good looking one," Raimi says, so he became a de facto leading man. "People liked our movies better with him in them."

In 1975, Spiegel directed "The James Hoffa Story," a 13-minute short starring Campbell as the labor leader and Raimi and Spiegel as kidnappers who abduct Hoffa and dispose his body, only to learn they've taken the wrong man.

Three years later, Spiegel won a local filmmaking award, a Sassy, for a short film he made titled "Picnic," described in a Detroit News article at the time as "a pie-in-the-face epic." Accepting the award at a ceremony in Southfield, Spiegel remained true to the movie's theme – and his own always-up-for-a-prank nature – by purposely tripping and falling on his face while on his way to the podium.

Raimi not only picked up filmmaking tips from Spiegel, but a sense of showmanship.

"He was a great entertainer. He loved watching people being entertained, that was his greatest joy," Raimi says.

"I remember in high school he would say, 'We're gonna show 'Night Walker' at this party tonight. And I went, 'We're gonna show a Super 8 version of William Castle's great movie, 'The Night Walker,' at one of our parties? You're gonna stop the party and show it? And he'd be like, 'Yeah!'" Raimi says.

"So he would shut down the party, set up the background, run an extension cord, put the reel on, and show 'Night Walker,' because it had great scares in it. Scott loved to watch the audience and go, 'Here comes the scare.' And I'd see the movie screen lighting up the audience and go, 'Ahhhh!' And Scott loved that, he would howl to himself, and out loud. And I really started to enjoy the effect that horror had on the crowd – in the cruelest, most cowardly way, seeing other people get scared."

That's when Raimi started building surprise elements into his movies.

In his 1979 debut feature "It's Murder," Raimi worked jump scares into his filmmaking, and he quickly learned the effect it had on audiences.

"To watch that simple formula work, and to be the designer of it, was incredibly thrilling," he says. "Scott showed me the way."

Everyone's friend

Those lessons led Raimi to "The Evil Dead," his 1981 breakthrough, which Spiegel was unable to work on due to family commitments. (Spiegel was, however, in the test footage Raimi shot to raise money for the movie, so he was a part of the project in a spiritual sense.)

Raimi brought Spiegel on board for "Evil Dead's" sequel / loose remake, 1987's "Evil Dead II," which combines elements of horror and slapstick humor, fine tuning the style that Raimi would go on to be known for, a through line that carries all the way up to "Send Help."

Spiegel was a key ingredient in that mix.

"Scott comes to write 'Evil Dead II,' we got these guys an office down the hall in our building, and they're howling with laughter all day long. Rob Tapert and I look at each other and go, 'These guys are writing a horror movie?'" Campbell says.

"But Scott's frame of mind was humor, and he and Sam were on a very similar wavelength," he says. "So that's why 'Evil Dead II' is such a spastic movie. It's really from Mars. And a lot of that is because of Scott Spiegel."

Raimi wanted Spiegel back for his third chapter in the "Evil Dead" series, "Army of Darkness," but Spiegel had scored himself a deal writing a Clint Eastwood movie. "The Rookie," written by Spiegel and Boaz Yakin, was directed by Eastwood and was released in 1991.

Spiegel was living in Los Angeles by then and had his own career trajectory, but it wasn't all peaches and cream.

"He experienced the downside of L.A. He got fired off a job," says Campbell. "It's like, 'Welcome to Hollywood.' Next thing you know, Quentin Tarantino's your best buddy, but now you get fired off a movie. So you've got a little taste of Hollywood, the good side and the bad side."

Spiegel, whose 1989 horror film "Intruder" was co-written and produced by Bender (and was based on Spiegel's days at the Walnut Lake market, working with Campbell), was well-connected. In addition to his Tarantino ties, Spiegel once lived in a house with Raimi, the Coen brothers, Holly Hunter, Frances McDormand and Kathy Bates, and he later formed a production company with Eli Roth.

He was known around town as a colorful character.

"Other people had bigger careers, but no one had bigger friends," says Campbell. "I mean, all the famous guys loved him because they thought he was such a quirky, kooky dude and he was such an original, you know what I mean?"

Spiegel would direct entries in the "From Dusk Till Dawn" and "Hostel" series, and Raimi brought him back for small roles in his films "The Quick and the Dead," "Spider-Man 2," "Drag Me to Hell" and, most recently, 2022's "Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness." He was thinking about Spiegel for a voice role in "Send Help" when he heard the news of his death.

"I wanted to put him in this movie – I was thinking about a looping session that was coming up – but he passed away unexpectedly," Raimi says. So instead, he dedicated the film to Spiegel in its credits.

When he spoke at Spiegel's memorial, Campbell – who makes a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo in a background photograph in "Send Help" – brought a cardboard box to break it down the way he and Spiegel used to at the market. "There's a certain way that you rotate it four times and you rip it at the seams," Campbell says.

He's also been thinking a lot about Spiegel and those early, carefree days of making movies when they were kids – even more so since the death of Josh Becker, another part of their childhood clique, in December.

Campbell dedicates his new movie "Ernie & Emma" to Spiegel, along with Raimi and the rest of the crew of filmmaking friends he grew up with.

"It's a callback to the carefree days of Super 8, where we could do whatever the f--- we wanted to do," Campbell says of the movie, which he wrote, directed, produced and starred in. "So I thought, 'All the boys are responsible for this,' so they're all in there."

Campbell is hitting the road and touring "Ernie and Emma" later this year, with a planned June engagement at the Redford Theatre. Raimi's "Send Help," meanwhile, hits screens this weekend.

Both are his friends' ways of ensuring Spiegel's memory lives on in darkened theaters, up in lights, on the big screen.

'SEND HELP'

MPA rating: R (for strong/bloody violence and language)
Running time: 1:53
How to watch: In theaters

BOOKS

THE DENTIST
A DS GEORGE CROSS MYSTERY
"A perfect detective for our time and for all time." —STEPHEN FRY
TIM SULLIVAN
THE CYCLIST
A DS GEORGE CROSS MYSTERY
"George Cross is becoming one of my favourite detectives." —ELLY GRIFFITHS
"A must-read series." —THE TIMES
TIM SULLIVAN
THE PATIENT
A DS GEORGE CROSS MYSTERY
"One of the best series to emerge in recent years." —SOPHIE HANNAH
"A character who is as endearing as any I've ever come across in this genre." —LIZ NUGENT
TIM SULLIVAN
Atlantic Crime / TNS

Why mystery readers will be seeing a lot of the detective DS Cross book series

By ERIK PEDERSEN
The Orange County Register (TNS)

Tim Sullivan's screenwriting credits include the films "A Handful of Dust," "Where Angels Fear to Tread," and "Letters to Juliet." He's also directed TV, including episodes of "Sherlock Holmes." His series of crime novels, which launched in the U.S. in late 2025 with "The Dentist," features DS George Cross, who is on the autistic spectrum.

The series is rolling out "The Cyclist" on Jan. 13, "The Patient" on Feb. 3, "The Politician" on March 3, "The Monk" on April 7 and "The Teacher" on May 5. Here, he takes the Book Pages Q&A.

Q: Please tell readers about your DS George Cross mysteries, which are rolling out into U.S. bookstores in the coming months.

A: My series of crime novels are centered around Detective Sergeant George Cross. George is on the autistic spectrum. He has autistic spectrum condition, which used to be known as Asperger's syndrome. This has many consequences for George. He can come across as brusque, rude even, when he doesn't mean to be. But it is what makes him a great detective. It doesn't give him a superpower where he can look at a murder scene and come up miraculously with an instant solution. It gives him the patience and a dogged determination to examine the normal, the routine and the mundane in the knowledge that this is where the answer to any case will often lie.

His attention to detail and looking in places other detectives choose to ignore, means he has the highest arrest-to-conviction rate in his force. Things other detectives dismiss as irrelevant to a case, or trivial, are what George is drawn to and it is so often where he finds the answer to a case. Based in the city of Bristol where I grew up, with the city of Bath nearby, the series also hopefully conjures up images of the beautiful southwest of England.

As with many people on the autistic spectrum, George is obsessed with things being right or done in the correct way, be it punctuation, pronunciation, the accuracy of historical facts, or the way his tea is made – loose leaf always, never a bag, milk in the cup first. He is, for example, incapable of disobeying an order, although he often finds ingenious ways around this. For him, order is the order of the day. Without order there can only be chaos. This need for things to be right neatly falls into line with his work. He needs the right thing to be done. The right person to be arrested and convicted. For justice to be done.

Q: You've worked in film and television – notably directing Sherlock Holmes adaptations – how did that affect the creation of your own detective character?

A: I've always had an interest in autism, particularly in the workplace. It can so easily be misinterpreted and presents a challenge for both the neurodivergent person and the neurotypical. I'd done many years of research and so it only seemed natural to put George on the spectrum.

In many ways he fits into a long tradition of detectives on the spectrum. From Auguste Dupin, Sherlock, Poirot and arguably Maigret, many fictional detectives would now be considered to sit somewhere on the spectrum. With Sherlock, this was very much the case. What I learned from Jeremy Brett as Sherlock was his loyalty to the original text. He recognized that Conan Doyle had created something unique and to be faithful to his writing would lead to an authentic portrayal of the great detective.

Q: As well as working on adaptations of E.M. Forster's "Where Angels Fear to Tread" and Evelyn Waugh's "A Handful of Dust," you also worked on the animated Aardman film "Flushed Away" – how did these experiences affect your novel writing?

A: I think the main things I took from writing screenplays was the importance of narrative drive. I also came away with an ability to set scenes and write dialogue, which have both proved to be useful in writing the novels. The difference between the two forms comes in the rhythms. Screenplays are obviously a lot shorter than novels. There is more time to develop things in a book, which took a lot of getting used to. I had to find my rhythm and make sure the books weren't at all episodic. Working in animation is such a different process to live-action movies and I suppose one thing I took away from that process is that things can always be improved.

Q: What are you reading now?

A: I'm working my way through Michael Connelly's Bosch canon, which is an absolute joy. Coming to the party late means I have a stack of them to read.

Q: How do you decide what to read next?

A: Often from recommendations of friends or booksellers. Reviews in the papers often result in me buying a book and adding it to an ever-increasing TBR pile.

Q: Do you remember the first book that made an impact on you?

A: Like so many people, it has to be "Lord of the Rings," just the scope of the imagination and the creation of an entirely unfamiliar world. But later it would be Henry James's "Portrait of a Lady."

Q: Is there a book or type of book you're reluctant to read?

A: I'm not a great one for horror. Just don't understand the attraction of settling down with a book and scaring yourself half to death.

Q: Do you listen to audiobooks? If so, are there any titles or narrators you'd recommend?

A: I can't listen to fiction as an audiobook for some reason, my mind just wanders off. But I really enjoy nonfiction, particularly the work of Ben MacIntyre.

Q: Which books are you planning to read next?

A: I'm researching the world of horse racing in the UK for a possible Cross novel, so I'm going to be reading books about famous horse trainers and the racing world.

Q: Is there a person who made an impact on your reading life – a teacher, a parent, a librarian or someone else?

A: There were a couple of English teachers at school who had a great influence on me. One was more traditional and introduced me to the works of Henry James and Mark Twain. The other was really into contemporary (at the time) American and European literature and so I found myself immersed in Jack Kerouac, Ken Kesey, Richard Brautigan and Herman Hesse at a young age.

Q: What do you find the most appealing in a book: the plot, the language, the cover, a recommendation? Do you have any examples?

A: For me, it's about plot and character and how sometimes, more often than not, they inform each other. The most successful crime fiction has a great character at its heart. I think what appeals to readers with my series is George's character. His and the inner circle of friends and colleagues who help him navigate his way through life and work. Not that he's always aware of it.

Q: Do you have a favorite bookstore or bookstore experience?

A: When I was younger, I liked nothing more than trawling round secondhand bookshops like Thorpes in Guildford and the Wise Owl Bookshop in Clifton, Bristol. You never knew what you were going to stumble upon and were hopefully able to afford. They have both disappeared – along with so many others – which is sad.

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Jan. 17, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
2. The Devil's Daughter. Danielle Steel. Delacorte
3. Hollow (deluxe ed.). Celina Myers. Hanover Square
4. The First Time I Saw Him. Laura Dave. Scribner
5. The Widow. John Grisham. Doubleday
6. Anatomy of an Alibi. Ashley Elston. Viking/Dorman
7. The Secret of Secrets. Dan Brown. Doubleday
8. Alchemised. Sen-LinYu. Del Rey
9. Enchantra (deluxe ed.). Kaylie Smith. Forever
10. The Intruder. Freida Mcfadden. Poisoned Pen

Hardcover nonfiction

1. The Official We Do Not Care Club Handbook. Melani Sanders. Harvest
2. Stop, in the Name of God. Charlie Kirk. Winning Team
3. Enough. Jastreboff/Winfrey. Avid Reader
4. Don't Think About Dinner. Jenn Lueke. Morrow
5. Of Course It's Good! Jessica Secrest. Page Street
6. The Next Renaissance. Zack Kass. Wiley
7. Eat Yourself Healthy. Jamie Oliver. Flatiron
8. The Other Side of Change. Maya Shankar. Riverhead
9. Strangers. Belle Burden. Dial
10. 1929. Andrew Ross Sorkin. Viking

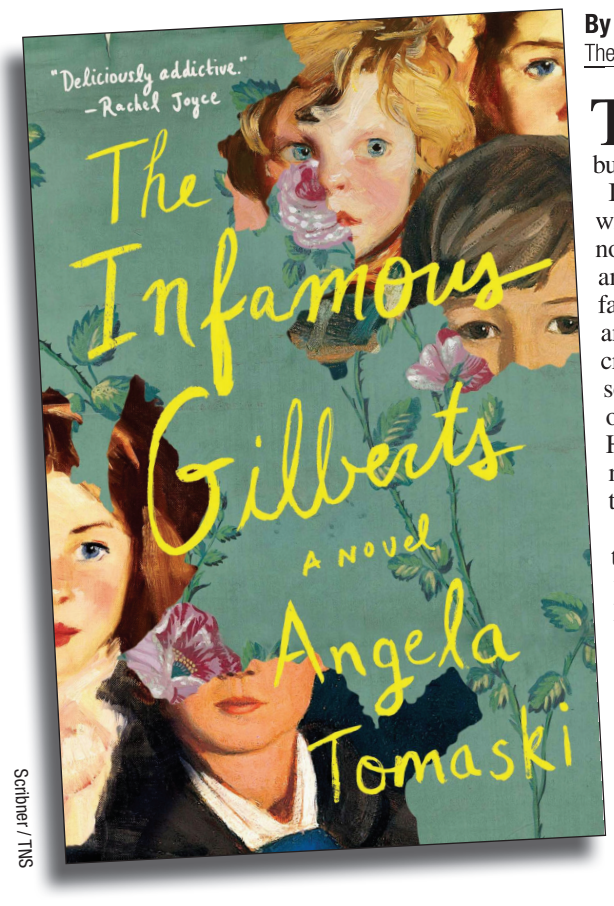
Trade paperback

1. Woman Down. Colleen Hoover. Montlake
2. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
3. Dungeon Crawler Carl. Matt Dinniman. Ace
4. The Housemaid. Freida McFadden. Grand Central
5. Psycho Fae. Jasmine Mas. Mira
6. People We Meet on Vacation (media tie-in). Emily Henry. Berkley
7. The God of the Woods. Liz Moore. Riverhead
8. The 2026 Old Farmer's Almanac. Old Farmer's Almanac
9. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco
10. The Surrogate Mother. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

The rich are different – and awful – in 'The Infamous Gilberts'



Scribner / TNS

By CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

There may be more style than substance in "The Infamous Gilberts" but it is very stylish, indeed.

I kept thinking of Shirley Jackson when I read Angela Tomaski's debut novel because Jackson wrote both amusingly macabre books about families ("Life Among the Savages") and darker works that hinted that the cracks in crumbling Gothic mansions sometimes represent the moral failings of the people who live in them ("The Haunting of Hill House"). "The Infamous Gilberts" does a bit of both of those things.

Tomaski traces the Gilberts from the 1940s to the 2000s, although both the book's language and the Gilberts' house seem to date to about a century earlier, around the time of "Jane Eyre." There's an absent father and a clueless, neglectful mother but the five Gilbert children – Lydia, Hugo, Annabel, Jeremy and Rosalind – are essentially raising themselves in an English country house of secret passages and worrying infestations.

"Gilberts" is partly structured as a tour of the now-deserted mansion, which is called Thornwalk and which is going to be converted into a hotel. A mysterious narrator, about whom all we know is that he is named Max, leads us from room to room, pointing out trinkets left by family members, damage inflicted during fights and blood left in ominous circumstances.

As anyone who has ever toured an inexpertly staged home-for-sale knows, you can tell a lot about people by the things they leave behind. And it's fun to speculate about them, even if – as with Thornwalk – there's no way you're buying that house.

Going back and forth in time and peeping at the Gilberts, almost as if Thornwalk is a dollhouse and they are dolls posed within it, Max offers a flurry of observations about the children. There's this, for instance, when he points out an ear-shaped mark worn into a door and observes, "It is not a nice habit, you say, this listening at doors. You are thinking badly of poor little Annabel. But she has her reasons."

Tomaski is too fond of versions of the phrase "but more of that later," a tease that can begin to feel monotonous. But she's adept at hints that, like "she has her reasons," promise revelations to come.

In the second sentence of "Gilberts," our narrator announces that it will be about "the downfall of this great family," once "the subject of much tawdry gossip and many a sensational headline," and the book delivers on that, with family members stealing from each other, locking one another up and, in the case of poor Annabel, ordering a medical procedure so unspeakable that, well, it's not spoken of, only hinted at.

There's a disconnect between the cool elegance of Tomaski's writing and the brutal behavior it describes. Inbred rich people probably have behaved like this down through the ages, but there's an unreality in "The Infamous Gilberts," along with a macabre sense of humor, that keeps it entertaining, rather than grim. The more Max calls attention to himself as narrator, the more aware we are that we don't need to worry about these unfortunate and awful people because they're just characters in a twisted story.

Max seems reluctant to spill everything. As a result, we don't get all of their stories – we learn just a tiny bit about Max himself, for instance. But, as the door to Thornwalk is closed for the final time at the end of the book, we're reminded that every doorway we pass hides a multitude of secrets. And that each one of those secrets leads to many more.

AUTOMOTIVE

AUTO REVIEWS

2026 Kia K4 Hatchback: A sensible shoe learns how to dance

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Kia / TNS

The 2026 Kia K4 Hatchback. On the road, the K4 Hatchback is impressively quiet.

2026 Kia K4 GT-Line Turbo Hatchback

Base price: $28,890

Engine: Turbocharged DOHC 1.6-liter four-cylinder

Horsepower/Torque: 190/195 pound-feet

EPA rating (combined city/highway): 28 mpg

Fuel required: Regular

Length/Width/Height: 174/73/56 inches

Ground clearance: 5.3 inches

Payload: 917 pounds

Cargo capacity: 22 cubic feet

Towing capacity: Not rated

In today's automotive zoo, there are three species: cars that promise to turn you into a shirtless action hero, cars designed by committees terrified of unemployment, and rarest of all, cars that arrive quietly and make you wonder how you ever tolerated your old one.

The 2026 Kia K4 Hatchback belongs firmly in that third category. It doesn't shout. It doesn't flex. It doesn't claim Nürburgring lap times or spiritual enlightenment. It just goes about its business with the unsettling competence of a person who alphabetizes their spice rack and somehow still has time to enjoy life.

Kia, you'll recall, took the perfectly serviceable Forte and renamed it the K4 Sedan for 2025, presumably because letters and numbers feel more modern than words. Now comes the hatchback version. Kia has grasped that Americans do, in fact, like hatchbacks, as long as they don't look like something you'd be issued at the airport rental counter along with a grudge and a sigh. This one does not.

Low, wide and muscular in a cut carbs/lift weights sort of way, the 2026 Kia K4 Hatchback looks like a 1970s Kammback that quit smoking and hired a trainer. The rear fenders bulge with purpose, and the hatch itself wears fashion usually reserved for auto-show concepts. Compared to this, the K4 Sedan looks like it still borrows money from its parents.

And despite being 11 inches shorter overall, the Hatchback keeps the Sedan's wheelbase, width and front-seat space, while somehow adding more rear headroom and an extra 7.6 cubic feet of cargo area. It's automotive black magic. The cabin is airy, thanks to generous glass and excellent rear visibility, an almost radical idea in an era when many cars are designed to simulate life in a medieval bunker.

Up front, there's plenty of legroom and headroom, though long-legged drivers will discover Kia's lingering affection for hard plastic exactly where your knees go when cornering. The seats are fairly comfortable, but their side bolsters surrender under pressure like a French border town in 1940. Heated seats come standard; ventilated seats and a heated steering wheel are optional, because weather is a fact of life.

The materials are inexpensive in the same way a well-made hammer is inexpensive: no nonsense, no fakery, and nothing that feels cheap. This is Kia's quiet superpower. The dashboard is dominated by a wide digital display that stretches across the cabin like a single eyebrow. The plastics are honest, fitted well and placed intelligently. Best of all, Kia still believes in physical buttons, a heretical stance in a world where adjusting the climate controls resembles an interpretive dance on a touchscreen. Wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, USB-C ports, and a wireless phone charger are standard. The cupholders adjust to accommodate everything from a respectable cappuccino to a Big Gulp that feeds a family of four.

Mechanically, the EX and GT-Line trims get a 2.0-liter four-cylinder making 147 horsepower, paired with a continuously variable transmission. It's fine. But the one you want is the GT-Line Turbo, which swaps in a turbocharged 1.6-liter making 190 horsepower and 195 pound-feet of torque, sent through a six-speed automatic transmission. Fuel economy drops from commendable to acceptable, but it runs on regular unleaded, which feels like an act of kindness.

The turbo engine likes revs, feeling a bit sleepy off-boost, but smooth and linear once it gets going. Turbo lag is minimal overall, refinement is impressive, and the automatic allows you to shift manually via paddles or the lever, though the paddles are oddly tiny, as if Kia added them under protest. This car absolutely cries out for the manual transmission offered in other markets, and its absence here feels faintly cruel. Zero to 60 mph takes slightly more than seven seconds, which won't rearrange your organs, but will keep you entertained.

On the road, the K4 Hatchback is impressively quiet. Small bumps are absorbed politely; larger ones remind you that sporty and plush rarely cohabitate peacefully. Steering is precise and nicely weighted in Sport mode, though it tells you nothing about what the front tires are doing, much like a teenager with earbuds. Body roll is modest, grip is predictable, and the whole thing feels light and genuinely fun, so much so that you forget you're in an economy car. Notably, the base EX gets a torsion-beam rear suspension; the GT trims upgrade to a multi-link setup with a sport-tuned suspension, which is why the Turbo feels especially sorted.

In a market obsessed with size, height and weight, along with the pretense that everyone is overlanding in the Dakar Rally, the 2026 Kia K4 Hatchback is refreshingly grounded. It's not a performance hero. It's not a luxury object. It's a compact economy car with ambition: extra style, extra space, and just enough fun to keep you smiling without convincing you you're Ayrton Senna on the way to Aldi.

Prices start at $24,990 for the EX and rise to $28,890 for the GT-Line Turbo, plus destination and options. If you can manage it, the Turbo is worth the extra cash. Kia has built an indisputably competitive, interesting hatchback in a segment where that's harder than it looks. It just shows up, does everything right, and leaves you wondering why so many other cars make such a fuss about so much less.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

Toyota Prius Nightshade looks hot, drives easy

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

2026 Toyota Prius
★★★★

Vehicle type: Front- and all-wheel-drive, five-passenger compact sedan

Price: Base $29,745, including $1,135 destination charge ($36,663 Nightshade model as tested)

Powerplant: 2.0-liter inline-4 cylinder married to two AC motors

Power: 194 horsepower (FWD); 196 horsepower (AWD)

Transmission: Continuously variable automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 7.1 seconds (Car and Driver); top speed, 115 mph

Weight: 3,153 pounds

Range: EPA est. mpg, 52 city/52 highway/52 combined, 588-mile range (FWD as tested); 40 mpg, range, 452 miles (observed)

Report card

Highs: Nerd no more; roomy cabin

Lows: CVT drone; windshield rake crimps tall front seat passengers

The Toyota Prius is really getting cheeky. America's favorite green nerd car underwent a fourth-generation transformation in 2025 from ugly duckling to swan. Sleek fascia. Scalloped flanks. Horizontal rear taillight. I saw your head swivel when I sailed by.

For 2025-26 it got a hot Nightshade edition. Take a look at my hot hatch tester (also being featured at the Detroit Auto Show) with yellow paint, black wheels, black mirror caps. It's a look familiar to enthusiast hellions like the Honda Civic Si and Ford Mustang that offer look-at-me Skittle colors.

Heck, so obsessed are enthusiasts with banana skin that Subaru announced last year to much fanfare that it will offer a limited-edition, 350-copy "Series Yellow" version of its WRX tS and BRZ tS hotties for the 2026 model year. In total, just 350 examples of each will be produced. Sweet.

Stomp the throttle and thoughts of a Prius hot hatch are quickly shelved. DROOOOOOONE goes the continuously variable transmission attached to the fuel-sipping 2.0-liter gas engine. Zero-60 mph in ... someday. It's a Prius all right, but it's no longer the class nerd.

When Prius entered the U.S. market 25 years ago, it was a novelty. Now Prius is now the halo of a brand that has gone almost all hybrid.

While the Prius maintains its signature aerodynamic roofline (key to mpg-aerodynamics), its design is no longer an outlier. Indeed, Prius is now Optimus, the brand's style leader.

The tapered fascia and horizontal taillight are now echoed in the best-selling RAV4, Camry and Crown models. The interior – once a geek's lair of toilet-bowl white console and dash-mounted shifter – is now cutting-edge Toyota, shared with the bZ EV and Crown.

In short, hybrid is now mainstream, and pioneer Prius is its patron.

Want a true hot hatch? Toyota does that, too, with the GR Crolla, one of the market's most engaging driver's cars with 300 horsepower from its King Kong-in-a-briefcase 1.6-liter three-cylinder engine and eager all-wheel-drive system. It's a testament to the breadth of this once vanilla brand that now races in the Hypercar class at Le Mans while also building trucks in Texas.

The RAV4 and Camry may be the brand's best-sellers but Prius, GR Corolla and the Tacoma pickup are its icons.

Auto analyst and muscle-car enthusiast Karl Brauer may have a Ford GT and Dodge Hellcat in his garage, but he's a Prius junkie: "I recommend the Prius as the best daily driver in the market: easy on the eyes, great fuel economy, comfortable to drive." High praise from someone who wouldn't be caught dead at a Greenpeace rally with Leo DiCaprio.

On a cross-state trek from Oakland County to Lake Michigan, the Prius was a peach to drive.

I didn't come close to the advertised 52 mpg and 588 miles of range, but did get 40 mpg and only had to fill up once on my 600-mile journey. That's a heckuva lot more efficient than the electric bZ's 252 miles of range, at a starting price about seven grand north of Prius.

I'm a giraffe, and the extreme windshield rake does crimp headroom in the front seats, but the Prius's roomy rear seats and hatch make this a viable family car. Toyota once proved resistant to electronics trends, but has since caught up in offering Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. Indeed, they are Prius's sole navigation source.

"Navigate to Charlevoix, Michigan," I barked, and Prius dutifully followed.

Key to phone apps is a charge pad lest your phone run out of juice in the middle of nowhere while navigating you to somewhere. Prius is properly equipped with a clever mail slot that held my phone vertically and proved superior to flat charging pads that take up a lot of console space.

The ergonomic thoughtfulness is inconsistent, however.

The Prius steering wheel is usefully littered with controls (adaptive cruise control, audio, instrument display info), but the controls are flat. That means I had to look away from the road to, say, increase or decrease cruise speed. Braille-like ridges identify these functions on competitor vehicles from Hyundai, Kia and Honda.

But overall, the Prius Nightshade was an easy, mainstream vehicle to drive. Gone are quirks like the split-window hatchback, which challenged rear visibility. Signature features remain, but they are useful innovations. Rear-seat access is via a C-pillar handle that aids body-line aesthetics. The recessed instrument display is unconventional but a clever solution to combining an instrument and head-up display.

Loaded with features, my Nightshade edition clocked in at a reasonable $35k. With its good looks, hybrid drivetrain and famed badge, Prius is positioned as a viable competitor to BMW and Audi. A rare mainstream badge (think Jeep) that has appeal to mainstream and premium customers.

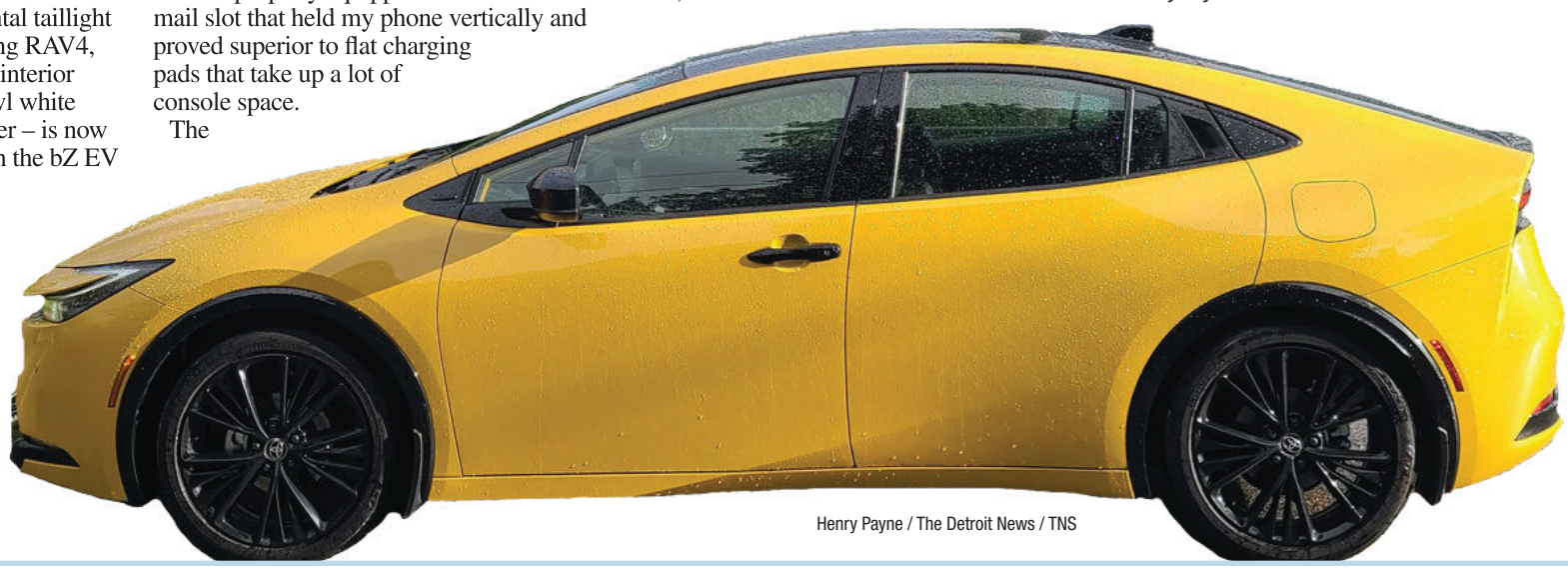
It is better looking than a comparable Lexus IS, especially when outfitted with the sporty Nightshade trim, which gives the car significant upscale cred. Like its luxe peers, it also features an EV mode so the car runs on electrons alone under 10 mph.

Also in tune with the luxury market: Prius options AWD, though it is engineered for low-speed applications (ahem, like the Payne driveway) since it stops working over 46 mph to save energy.

Who knows? If the Prius Nightshade sells well, Toyota's speed-obsessed Chairman Akio Toyoda may demand his halo car get a proper performance model. Think bigger battery/engine to goose low-end torque.

A Prius hot hatch would kill the nerd stigma forever.

Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.



Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

New health smartwatch is a powerful, stylish option

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Link2Care, a next-generation preventive-health wearable platform, announced the United States release of its Watch2Care Vital Smartwatch recently at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

The **Watch2Care Vital** is touted in its press release as the first smartwatch uniting 3,000 Years of traditional Chinese medicine with over 9 million user cases of real-world health data and advanced AI systems. Sure, it tracks your steps like many of us (including me) are so consumed with, but it's way more than that. Inside the smartwatch are advanced sensors that capture and analyze Western biometrics and TCM pulse data in real time.

The Watch2Care Vital is touted in its press release as the first smartwatch uniting 3,000 years of traditional Chinese medicine with over 9 million user cases of real-world health data and advanced AI systems.
Link2Care / TNS

For the most part, it's an advanced health tracking device you wear on your wrist. A Link2Care representative mentioned it was more of a device with a holistic approach.

Features include groundbreaking health-monitoring technology that focuses on organ-system insights for the heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys. The results focus on alerting users to early warnings of potential health problems and on encouraging lifestyle and dietary adjustments.

The monitoring will provide continuous monitoring of 38 physiological metrics, including the ever-popular and essential sleep analysis, active lifestyle tracking, organ system monitoring and real-time biometrics. Every day, the Watch2Care Vital provides AI-generated health reports and composite health scores through the Link2Care app (Apple App and Google Play Store), which is also used for firmware updates. The sleep monitoring feature watches for abnormal nighttime heart-rate spikes.

In my short time with the watch, I wasn't able to track anything significant in my body, but its capabilities definitely caught my attention. While it's not a smartwatch like we are used to with devices like the Apple Watch, it offers messages, notifications, email, endless apps and CarPlay connectivity.

The health features are marketed to far exceed what other smartwatches can using Chinese medicine. You get your first report from the traditional Chinese medicine after wearing the Watch2Care Vital for 24 hours. Among the information in the report are scores out of 100 for your heart, liver, kidney and spleen. There is also a feature to measure your blood oxygen level.

Since it is paired with your smartphone, the Watch2Care Vital will send an alert when there is new mail or messages to look at on your phone. It does tell you the time, have an alarm and weather, which is pulled from your smartphone.

The watch looks much more stylish than more popular smartwatches. It has a 48-hour battery life, which I can attest to, and fast charges in about an hour and a half. A proprietary USB charging cable is included. The display has a 1.43-inch touchscreen with rounded edges, built into a titanium case, with Bluetooth 5.3 for pairing. It has a sparkling, clear resolution of 466 by 466 and has an IP67 waterproof rating.

Being a long-time Apple Watch user, I found the touchscreen on the Watch2Care Vital to be responsive and easy to use to access other features and screens. There are six watch faces to choose from; there's no right or wrong, it's just what you like and what information you want to see. I navigated to the face, which shows the time in the largest font.

http://www.link2care.asia, $2,384

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

Are you really unsubscribed?

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

We all get a lot of emails, and every once in a while, it feels good to purge the inbox and unsubscribe from the ones that are getting on our nerves.

In the United States, it is a federal law that marketing emails must include an "unsubscribe" link.

A lot of people I know are afraid to click on them, for fear of getting signed up for more emails.

I can't tell you how many people ask me if those unsubscribe links are real.

My answer is, they should be, but I'm betting not all of them do what they say they will do.

Google recently unveiled a new feature for Gmail called Manage Subscriptions, which is found in the Gmail left sidebar (in the web interface).

You can also find the feature in the Gmail app on your Android or iPhone by tapping the three-line menu on the upper left and choosing Manage Subscriptions.

If you don't see the option on your phone, you may need to update the version of the Gmail app on your phone (I did).

When you click on Manage Subscriptions, you'll see a list of senders, sorted by how often they send you messages.

Each sender also has an "unsubscribe" link.

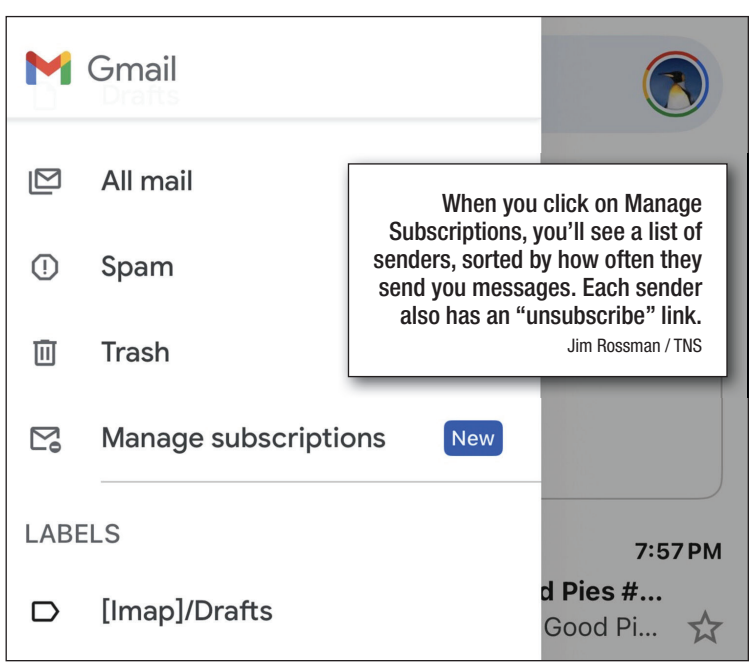
Google says their unsubscribe link triggers Gmail to send an unsubscribe request (using the sender's list -- unsubscribe mechanism if available) and stop future marketing messages from that sender.

Yahoo! also has an unsubscribe feature for Yahoo! Mail users.

You can usually find the Unsubscribe link either at the top of the email or at the bottom of the message next to the sender information.

As I mentioned above, not all emailers will actually unsubscribe you, but if you find yourself continuing to receive unwanted messages after going through the unsubscribe process, your best bet is to mark the unwanted messages as spam and let your email provider filter those out for you.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.



TECH REVIEW

These two chargers might be all you need

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Phones used to ship with a lot of accessories that usually included headphones, a charging cable and a USB wall charger.

Today, phones ship with a charging cable and that's about it, so you're on your own for a wall charger. A lot of people will just go with whatever charger they happen to have tucked away in their junk drawer, but chances are you're shortchanging yourself and the time you spend charging your phone.

Here are two devices that separately do a great job charging your devices, but together, they may be all you need to bring on your next weekend trip to keep your phone or tablet or laptop going strong.

Anker Nano Charger 45W

Anker has introduced a new charger aimed at iPhone users that can identify the model of the phone (for iPhone 15 and later models) and provide the optimum amount of power to keep the battery charged up quickly and keep it healthy for longer battery life.

The Anker Nano Charger 45W, Smart Display, 180-degree foldable ($39.99, anker.com), is tiny, but it will make your iPhone very happy. It has a single USB-C port to charge your stuff.

The Smart Charger uses AI to adjust the voltage throughout the charge to provide the fastest charge without overheating.

The charger has a rotating smart display to provide a live view of the real-time wattage being provided, status icons, battery progress for compatible devices and it will auto rotate depending on the plug orientation.

The prongs of the foldable plug let the user orient the charger 90 degees or 180 degrees to best fit their plug situation. If you have an iPhone 15 or newer, the charge level of your phone's battery will appear on the charger's screen, along with the exact rate of charge and a description of the charge, such as FAST, STEADY or TRICKLE.

There is a button on the charger to toggle through several data views and to switch between two charging mode – auto and care. Care mode actively lowers the temperature after the initial fast charge, protecting the battery during overnight charging.

The Nano Charger 45W comes in four colors to match this year's iPhone colors.

Don't think that this is just for iPhones. It also recognized my iPad Air and will work equally well on my MacBooks. It will also work on older iPhones and Android devices.

This is the wall charger Apple should be including with their devices.

BMX SolidSafe 5K Solid-State Magnetic Power Bank

I've got half a dozen power banks designed to magnetically snap to the back of the iPhone for on-the-go wireless charging, and there is not a lot to distinguish them from each other.

Lately I've been testing the BMX SolidSafe 5K Solid-State Magnetic Power Bank ($79.99, heybmx.com), which looks a lot like the others, but it is hiding a secret under its precision unibody aluminium case – a solid state battery.

What is a solid-state battery?

According to BMX: "Most power banks today use lithium-ion or lithium-polymer battery cells filled with a flammable liquid electrolyte. When those cells overheat or get damaged, that liquid can react under pressure and cause fires or explosions.

"SolidSafe uses a semi-solid-state cell, not a traditional liquid one. The liquid content is reduced to about 2.5 percent, replaced with a gel-like electrolyte that stays cool and stable."

We've all seen news stories about lithium batteries starting fires that are hard to extinguish. BMX's website shows someone driving a screw through their power bank with a hammer and it doesn't start on fire.

The SolidSafe 5K provides 5,000 milliamp-hours of power, which can charge up most cell phones one time, so with the battery stuck to your phone, you're doubling your battery life.

The Qi 2 wireless charger provides up to 15 watts of charging power, and the magnetic ring keeps it securely mounted to a MagSafe-compatible iPhone or Android phone with a magnetic charging case.

It has a USB-C port to charge your gadgets that can't wirelessly charge. The port is also used to charge up the battery. The port provides pass-through charging, so you can attach the battery to your phone and charge your phone and battery at the same time.

On the front, you'll find a small LED display showing the charge level of the battery and the exact amount of power flowing in or out.

The SolidSafe 5K also has a small lanyard loop that conceals a short USB-C charging cable. That cable is one of the neatest accessories I've seen in a long time.

There are cheaper power banks, but for the price, the SolidSafe is safer, light, thin, has a very informative status screen and can charge two devices at once with its included charging cable.

There's nothing I'd change about this battery. It is just a darn handy gadget to keep on hand.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.

The BMX SolidSafe 5K Solid-State Magnetic Power Bank.
BMX / TNS

The Anker Nano Charger 45W.
Anker / TNS

HOME & GARDEN

DESIGN RECIPES

Tips for selling your home in winter

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

With often a flood of listings hitting the market after the holidays, it is essential for one's property to show its best and stand out. The winter or post-holiday buyer is motivated, but with warmer spring months not far behind, they will likely only buy if a home is move-in ready.

The winter buyer is often plagued with challenges such as lack of labor or materials for renovations and will want a property that doesn't signal "worry and work." For the home seller, a thoughtful marketing approach achieved through value driven, design updates can help your property stand out, photograph beautifully and appeal to buyers looking for comfort as much as value.

Looking for ideas for maximizing the sale of your home this winter? Here are some top tips.

1. Maximize natural lighting. Remove heavy draperies and blinds. Additionally, clean windows thoroughly, and keep window treatments minimal to allow as much daylight as possible into your home.

2. Create a warm, inviting entry. First impressions matter even more in winter, so add a clean doormat, narrow console, mirrors and soft lighting to make the home feel welcoming from the moment potential buyers arrive.

3. Layer textiles to add a sense of coziness and warmth. Elements such as area rugs, throws and textured pillows instantly help to add visual warmth.

4. Swap in higher wattage bulbs as well as add additional lighting. With winter bringing shorter days, ensure rooms are well lit with a mix of table lamps, floor lamps and overhead lighting to help increase a home's overall illumination.

5. Keep color palettes light, bright, minimal and cohesive. Soft neutrals, as well as both cool and warm whites, help spaces feel brighter and more expansive, counteracting the darker winter months.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

The winter or post-holiday buyer is motivated, but with warmer spring months not far behind, they will likely only buy if a home is move-in ready.
Dreamstime / TNS

Dreamstime / TNS

Ants can be very active indoors during winter.

How can I control pests in winter?

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

When cold weather sets in, it's tempting to assume pest problems go into hibernation along with the garden. Unfortunately, winter doesn't drive pests away. As temperatures drop, many insects and rodents look for warm shelter, steady food and safe places to wait out the season, and your home makes an appealing spot.

Winter pest control isn't about reacting to swarms. It's about prevention, early detection and making your home a less inviting place for unwanted guests. A little attention now can prevent bigger, more expensive problems come spring. And even if you don't live in colder climates, many of these hints will help no matter the season.

Many insects and rodents are "overwintering" pests. That means they survive cold months by sheltering in protected environments like homes, sheds, garages and woodpiles. Depending on the species, they may become dormant, slow down their activity or remain fully active indoors. Common winter pests include mice, rats, squirrels, cockroaches, ants, silverfish, beetles, fleas, wasps and even termites.

During winter, signs of pests are usually subtle. Watch for droppings, shed insect skins, chewed food packaging or wires, unexplained bites, nests or webs, and scratching or rustling sounds in walls or attics. You may also notice live or dead insects near windows or baseboards, where warmth and light draw them out.

Rodents are especially active in winter. Mice can squeeze through openings as small as a dime, and once inside, they reproduce quickly. Termites may slow down in colder weather, but they don't disappear, and damage can continue unnoticed behind walls. Winter is often when infestations go undisturbed the longest, making early signs especially important.

The most effective winter pest control starts outside. Sealing entry points is one of the most important steps you can take. As you winterize your home, check for cracks in foundations, gaps around doors and windows, broken screens, openings around vents, and access points near roofs, chimneys and eaves. Caulking and weatherstripping do double duty by keeping out cold air and pests.

Firewood deserves special attention. Beetles, ants and other insects love woodpiles, especially when they're protected from the elements. Keep firewood stacked at least 20 feet from your home and only bring in small amounts as needed. Large indoor stacks increase the chance of bringing pests inside with them.

Food access is another major draw. Pantry pests and rodents can chew through cardboard, paper and thin plastic. Store dry goods in thick plastic or metal containers with tight-fitting lids. Clean crumbs, spills and sugary residue from pantry shelves and cabinet bases. Garbage should always be covered, and outdoor trash bins should be sealed tightly or stored in a garage if possible.

Attics and basements are common winter nesting spots. Wasps and hornets sometimes build nests indoors during colder months, especially in attics. If you find a nest, it's safest to call a professional rather than attempt removal yourself. Afterward, sealing the entry point prevents repeat visits.

Some infestations are best left to professionals. While DIY pest control products may cost $10 to $100, they don't always solve the underlying problem. Professional pest control typically costs a few hundred dollars, depending on severity, but it often includes inspections, targeted treatments and prevention plans. Many companies offer year-round service plans that include winter inspections, which can catch problems before spring activity ramps up.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.

What do I need to know about carbon monoxide in my home?

By ANGIE HICKS
Ask Angi (TNS)

Carbon monoxide (CO) is one of the most serious safety hazards in a home, and one of the easiest to miss. The gas has no smell, color or taste, which means you won't know it's there without a detector. That's why understanding how carbon monoxide detectors work is essential for protecting your household.

Carbon monoxide is created whenever fuel burns. Gas furnaces, water heaters, fireplaces, gas stoves, generators and vehicles running in attached garages all produce CO. If something goes wrong with the appliance or it isn't properly ventilated, carbon monoxide builds up indoors. This interferes with the body's ability to carry oxygen. Early symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning often feel like the flu and can include headache, dizziness, nausea, weakness, chest pain and confusion. High exposure levels can be fatal, sometimes before occupants realize what's happening. And since carbon monoxide thrives best in a sealed environment where heating systems are operating, it's a much bigger concern in cold weather.

Because people can't sense carbon monoxide, detectors act as your early warning system. A basic detector costs about $20, with wireless or smart models costing more. The EPA recommends installing a carbon monoxide detector on every level of your home and near sleeping areas. Because carbon monoxide mixes evenly with air, detectors generally work best on walls rather than ceilings. Homes with gas appliances, fireplaces or attached garages should be especially diligent about coverage. Take your CO alarm seriously. If it goes off, leave the home immediately, find fresh air and call 911.

Regular maintenance around the home helps prevent carbon monoxide problems. Twice-yearly inspections of your HVAC system (before you first turn on heating or cooling for the season) help prevent leaks or breakdowns that might release carbon monoxide. Anything that burns fuel needs to be properly ventilated and inspected regularly, and never operate a fuel-burning device inside your home unless it was designed for interior use.

Why you need both smoke and CO detectors

Carbon monoxide detectors and smoke detectors may look similar, but they serve different purposes. Carbon monoxide detectors sense CO gas from fuel-burning sources. Smoke detectors sense smoke from fires, giving occupants early warning so they can escape. One cannot substitute for the other.

Smoke detectors work best when mounted on ceilings, since smoke rises. Carbon monoxide detectors typically perform better on walls. Smoke alarms usually last about 10 years, while carbon monoxide detectors need replacement sooner.

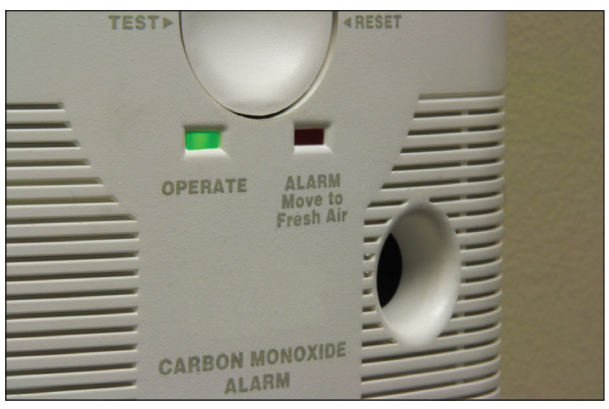
Some homeowners choose combination smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, which tend to start around $35 in cost. These units can save space and reduce visual clutter, particularly in smaller homes or apartments. Many models use different alarm sounds or indicator lights to distinguish between smoke and CO events.

The challenge is placement. Smoke detection favors ceilings, while carbon monoxide detection favors walls, so a single unit may not be ideally positioned for both hazards in larger homes. If you install one, carefully read the manufacturer's directions.

Maintenance for both types of detectors is straightforward but essential. Test alarms monthly, replace batteries as recommended, keep sensors clean and replace units when they reach the end of their lifespan. Occasional false alarms can happen, especially near kitchens, bathrooms or garages, but frequent alarms often signal a placement or maintenance issue that needs attention.

The bottom line is simple: Carbon monoxide safety comes down to preparation. Install detectors where they're recommended, maintain them regularly, and respond immediately when they alarm. You can't see or smell carbon monoxide, but with the right detectors in place, you won't have to.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.



Dreamstime / TNS

Like smoke detectors, carbon monoxide detectors are an essential part of home safety.

TRAVEL

A woman jumps off a cliff into the sea at Ricks cafe in Negril, Jamacia on May 21, 2017.
Daniel Slim / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

The real travel influencers reveal best destinations, cruises for 2026

By MIA TAYLOR
TravelPulse (TNS)

When it comes to shaping global travel trends, identifying the latest hotspots or driving awareness for new cruises, there are different types of influencers: Social media influencers. And the real influencers: travel advisers and travel industry insiders.

Social media influencers are paid to promote destinations, hotels, and cruises. But travel advisers and travel industry insiders recommend each of these things because they're experienced travel professionals who have a deep understanding of quality, service and the latest industry developments. And in many cases, they've also vetted the product being recommended.

So, when it comes to gauging what's on tap for the year ahead in globetrotting, yes you can scroll your Instagram feed to drool over the latest glossy reels posted by high-paid influencers. But for the real deal, you may also want to tune in to the insider recommendations we've gathered from industry professionals who have the inside track on what to see and do in 2026.

We asked each of these professionals to name the top destinations, hotels, and cruise vacations for 2026. Here's what they had to say.

BEST DESTINATIONS FOR 2026

Laos

Known for being one of Southeast Asia's best kept secrets, experts say 2026 will be the year that the country of Laos starts attracting discerning travelers. Traversed by the Mekong River, Laos features mountainous terrain, French colonial architecture and an abundance of Buddhist monasteries.

"With increased regional access and quiet luxury hotels like Rosewood Luang Prabang elevating the standard, travelers can enjoy deeply spiritual and culturally rich experiences without the crowds elsewhere in the region," says Duncan Greenfield-Turk, founder of Global Travel Moments.

Egypt

The official opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum has drawn much global attention to Egypt, making it the place to be right now, says Jozef Verbruggen, founder and director at Untamed Travelling.

"The new Grand Egyptian Museum is certainly number one for history and storytelling, and the ultimate source of our world today," says Verbruggen, adding: "Cairo today is noticeably cleaner and bustles with life. Old Cairo remains one of the easiest places for travelers to connect with local culture. The markets are active, the souks are open, and the smell of mint tea or fresh bread is literally everywhere."

On top of all of that, Verbruggen says the Giza Plateau is much cleaner and better managed than it has been in years past. "Pathways are clearer, signage is improved, and the flow of people around the site is more controlled. It makes it easier to actually take in the Pyramids without feeling overwhelmed," he adds.

Jamaica

Jamaica has been busy recovering and rebuilding after a devastating hurricane and the areas that were impacted are now fully open for business. Translation: There's no better time to visit the island and show you're support.

But what makes the island especially compelling for 2026 is the role tourism plays in supporting local livelihoods and long-term economic recovery, says Saskia Jackson, travel adviser and founder of World Travels with Saskia.

"Travelers are increasingly interested in destinations where their presence has a positive impact, and Jamaica offers that in a very tangible way," says Jackson.

"For families in particular, Jamaica provides an opportunity to travel with purpose. When trips are thoughtfully planned to include locally owned accommodations, cultural experiences, and community engagement, children gain a real understanding of how travel can contribute to rebuilding economies and supporting others," Jackson adds. "It becomes not just a vacation, but a meaningful learning experience."

Alentejo, Portugal

Portugal's Alentejo region is where the most discerning traveler will go quietly in a year where globetrotting is increasingly focused purpose over noise, says LaDell Carter, founder and lead luxury lifestyle travel designer at Royal Expression Travels.

"This region still has an unblemished quality to it; there's a relaxed pace to life; and the definition of luxury is based upon having enough space, quiet and connecting to the earth," says Carter.

Although Alentejo encompasses a great deal of Portugal's geography, it is also one of the country's least populated areas, making it even more appealing.

"I'm finding my clients are choosing this area as it represents something increasingly rare; the ability to find privacy, natural beauty, and experiences that are not shallow and/or performative, without pretence," adds Carter.

Mérida, Mexico

Located in the northwest corner of the Yucatán Peninsula (three hours west of Cancun), Mérida stands out as one of the most compelling destinations for 2026, says Rob DelliBovi, owner & CEO of RDB Hospitality.

"It offers the cultural depth travelers are craving without the congestion of larger hubs," says DelliBovi. "The city has historic architecture, a great culinary scene, and proximity to cultural experiences and sights like cenotes, haciendas, and archaeological sites. It's perfect for travelers looking for longer, more immersive stays."

Belize

Another destination that makes DelliBovi's 2026 to-do list is Belize, which is emerging as a great destination for travelers seeking adventure, wellness, and authenticity without overtourism.

"It offers a rare combination of nature, cultural heritage, and luxury experiences, from jungle lodges and private islands to reef and marine exploration, all within a relatively compact and easy-to-navigate destination," says DelliBovi.

Panama

Long an under the radar location, the Central American country of Panama is a destination that's finally getting its moment in the sun. Meaning: You better go before it gets too popular, says travel adviser Jessica Parker, founder of Trip Whisperer.

"New hotels like The Ordovician and air routes in several cities across the U.S. are making it an easy getaway that is a great dupe for Costa Rica," says Parker. "I love that it even has its own rainforest within the Panama City limits."

Yes, you read that right, there is an rainforest within Panama City limits. And that's not all Panama is known for. You'll also find charming colonial buildings and cobblestone streets in the city's old town or Casco Viejo district, stunning beaches, opportunities for snorkeling, engaging with indigenous communities and rural agrotourism.

BEST HOTELS FOR 2026

Rosewood Miyajima, Japan

"Located on sacred ground near the iconic floating tori gate, this new property promises a fusion of heritage and high-touch hospitality," says Greenfield-Turk, of Global Travel Moments. "It's a natural next chapter for travelers who've already been to Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto… It can be paired with journeys across Hokuriku."

Azulik Resort Tulum, Mexico

If a visit to the Mexican hotspot of Tulum is on your radar for 2026, you won't want to miss Tulum Azulik, which stands apart for its striking biomorphic architecture and its ability to immerse guests fully in the surrounding Mayan jungle, says Saskia Jackson, founder of World Travels with Saskia.

"The experience feels more like inhabiting a piece of living art than staying at a traditional resort," says Jackson.

What makes Azulik especially relevant for 2026 is its commitment to low-impact, off-grid living and sustainability without sacrificing design or comfort.

"The resort's adults-only, eco-luxury villas, built to exist in harmony with the landscape, encourage travelers to slow down, reconnect with nature, and engage with Mayan-inspired wellness practices in a way that feels both intentional and deeply immersive," says Jackson.

Herdade da Malhadinha Nova, Alentejo, Portugal

Herdade da Malhadinha Nova is not a hotel, per se. Rather, it is a unique and stunning family owned estate.

"Everything at the estate originates from the ground beneath your feet. Your bread was baked using the wheat produced on the estate. The wine is sourced from the vineyards you pass through on horseback while visiting," says Carter of Royal Expression Travels. "Eating here is not merely eating, it is telling stories."

Each room at the estate features a private pool, providing guests a view of vast fields, filled with oak trees and grazing horses. But the defining element that separates Herdade da Malhadinha Nova from other similar destinations is the level of intimacy experienced by guests.

"There's nothing artificial, no pretension," says Carter. "Here, luxury is a feeling, grounded and healing. It is the type of destination from which clients leave feeling changed, not simply restored."

Hotel Sevilla, Mérida, Mexico

The charming Hotel Sevilla offers a vivid example of a charming, boutique property that truly immerses travelers in a location. Translation: Exactly the type of culturally rich boutique stays travelers are seeking in 2026.

"It's in the heart of Mérida and offers an intimate, locally rooted stay that encourages guests to engage with the city firsthand," says DelliBovi, of RDB Hospitality Group.

The Belize Collection, Belize

The Belize Collection features an intriguing portfolio of luxury resorts, each of allows travelers to experience the country's full diversity, from beachfront escapes to jungle retreats.

"Their hotels emphasize sustainability, cultural connection, and rich experiences," says DelliBovi.

Garza Blanca Cancun, Mexico

The stunning Garza Blanca Resort & Spa Cancun opened its doors in December 2020 to rave reviews. Known for offering an elevated beach getaway, even for families. Jason Wright, founder of Paradise Travel Group, says the property "feels way more luxurious than it's price point, especially for families."

"Clients consistently love it because kids under 12 stay free, the food is genuinely excellent, and the overall design feels polished and upscale," explains Wright. "That combination is rare to come by. The value is especially strong for families who want a refined experience without paying true luxury pricing. It's one of those resorts that quietly overdelivers on every front."

BEST CRUISE VACATIONS FOR 2026

Antarctica Marathon, Event-Driven Expedition Cruises

Event-led expedition cruises are emerging as one of the most exciting travel formats for 2026. A good example is the Antarctica Marathon, in which travelers travel by boat out to Antarctica to run a marathon event, while experiencing one of the world's most remote regions in a structured, expertly supported way, says Jeff Adams, president of Marathon Tours & Travel.

House of Nine Yacht

Yachting vacations are soaring in popularity and there's one yacht offering in particular that Carter, of Royal Expressions Travels, should be on your list for 2026.

"This new-to-the-scene yacht has just completed its initial sailing and immediately caught our eye," says Carter. "House of Nine is much like a floating private membership club, carefully designed and curated for both design enthusiasts and culturally-inclined travelers."

Carter says the experience is ideal for couples and small groups who would like to experience the exclusivity of a private charter experience, yet still desire the camaraderie of a well-designed onboard community.

"House of Nine provides a viable alternative to a traditional cruise for 2026," says Carter. "It offers an elegant blend of Italian craftsmanship, thoughtful programming and slow travel."

TRAVEL TIPS

It'll cost you $45 to fly without a Real ID starting in February

Starting next month, travelers who want to board a domestic flight without a Real ID will have to pay $45 to have their identity verified through the Transportation Security Administration's new security screening program.

On Feb. 1, if you attempt to get through an airport security checkpoint without a Real ID, or another TSA-approved form of identification, you have the option to verify your identity through the modernized alternative-verification program, officially called TSA Confirm.ID.

If you choose to use Confirm.ID you will be charged a $45 fee.

TSA announced the new identification verification program in December, saying it is essential to traveler safety.

"Because it keeps terrorists, criminals, and illegal aliens out of the skies and other domestic transportation systems such as rail," said Adam Stahl, acting deputy administrator for the agency. "The vast majority of travelers present acceptable identification like Real IDs and passports, but we must ensure everyone who flies is who they say they are."

More than 94 percent of passengers currently use their Real ID or other acceptable form of identification, according to TSA. About 58 percent, more than 19 million, of all driver's license and ID cardholders in California have a Real ID, according to the California Department of Motor Vehicles.

Opting to use Confirm.ID, here's how to pay the $45.

If you don't have a Real ID or another TSA-approved form of identification you'll be presented with the option to confirm your identity with Confirm.ID at a TSA checkpoint, before entering security lines.

Anyone 18 and older must show TSA their Real ID or another TSA-approved form of identification. Children under 18 do not have to provide a form of identification for domestic flights, according to TSA.

To use the Confirm.ID option you'll need to submit a form and make a payment online either before you arrive or when you're at the airport.

The form and payment can be submitted through the website pay.gov.

– Karen Garcia / Los Angeles Times (TNS)